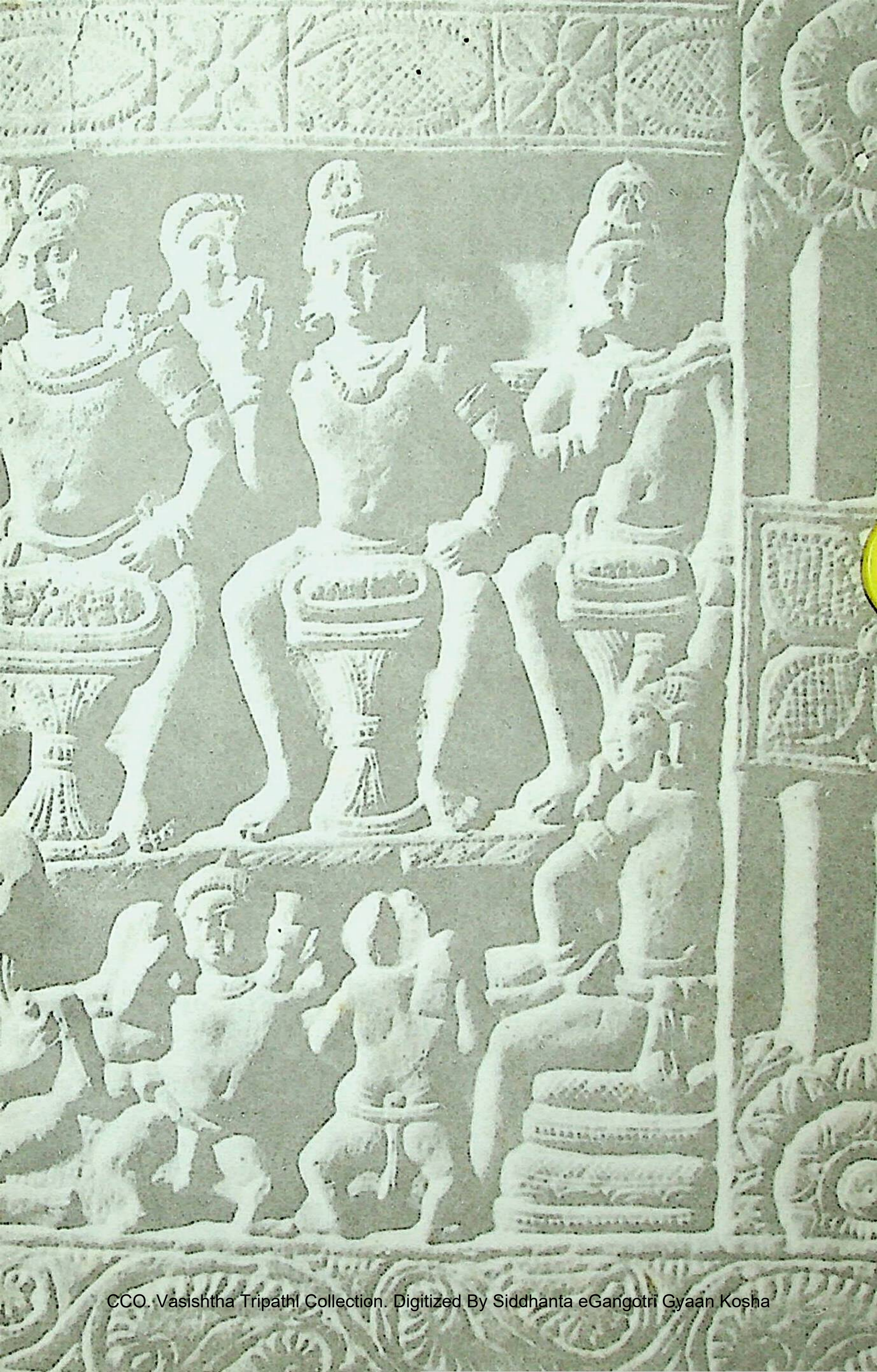
MEMORIAL STONES

Punathil Kunhabdulah

Translated from Malayalam by
Elzy Tharamangalam







The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi

Sahithya Akademi Award winning Malayalam Novel

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SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Memorial Stones

1

This is the story of a venerable old mosque and its ancient grounds.

Yes, that's right. The story of a mosque and its compound where they dug new graves and opened the old ones to dump dead bodies when cholera spread death and disease on the land.

The huge dilapidated mosque has a tall steep spiral and a shapely dome on its rooftop. The mosque rests in the shadow of these two structures.

It is not fair to call this magnificent edifice a mere prayer hall, for it has an immense interior and an imposing outer structure. The moss-covered exterior of the outer mosque is made of old red stones. So vast and deep is its interior that thousands of people can sit and pray there. Then comes the womb-like inner room, the sanctorum, where the holy men pray. Amidst their prayer one can hear the sounds of the bats and the doves in the attic.

The massive mosque sits in the middle of its boundless grounds. A field full of graves with enough bodies in them to spin a lot of yarns and tales about this eerie place.

Right next to the mosque is a broad, clean walk; beyond that the ground is full of nochil shrubs. Instead of clustering together the plants grow apart, away from each other like isolated communities. Palm trees stand tall between the sparsely growing nochil and the earth beneath is covered with fallen, ripe, juicy ice apples. The moist earth below these fruits is full of crawling ants and lowly mating worms.

Beyond all this is sheer darkness - sprawling trees, tombs and a veritable thicket that grows in profusion hugging the monuments. This jungle is home to myriad poisonous creatures and phantom spirits - both redeemed and unredeemed.

"All this belongs to Mammad Haji". Seeing the unending fields of paddy, Eramullan mused, Mammad Haji must have walked through each of these fields many a time, he must have scrutinised every woman bent at work, tending paddy. He must have worked hard to get every grain of rice intact into his granary. As he walked through the fissured dry field, the sun was blazing on the horizon.

Right in the middle of this field, there was a stream that gushed out during the rainy season. Now its bed was dry, shrunk up like a dead python. Last year, the coconut seller, Koyotti had drowned here in the flood. Besides buying and selling coconuts, the fellow also suffered from epilepsy. When every one else refused to touch the corpse, it was Eramullan and Krishnan Nair who brought the body home. He was a P.C.120. He had done the ritual of washing for Koyotti also. But all that cutting they did on Koyotti in the hospital. God! The memory of those scars on the dead body made him shudder.

After a long walk, Eramullan reached the ground beyond the paddy field. A few more twists and turns and they were in Mammad Haji's ancestral house. Eramullan could hear the faint echo of lamenting in the distance. The wailers must be pretty exhausted by now, he thought.

"Walk a little faster", the boy prodded him from behind.

Finally, the two of them reached the house. From a distance, there seemed to be a sea of turbans and shaved heads. The front yard was already covered with cigar butts and betel-nut stains.

Eramullan went straight in. Most people in the front of the house saw him. Some cursed him for being late.

Palalppura Mammad Haji lay stretched on the cot. As he peeped under the white sheet to take a look, fear slithered into Eramullan. The dead man's mouth was wide open - a ravenous mouth, the sign of damnation.

Eramullan tried to push and massage the drooping jaw into place for a long time. He even tried to tie it up with a magic cord, with spells and prayers. But when all attempts failed, he said:

"It is late" he continued, "a mouth that doesn't stink even when not closed, is a sure sign of blessing".

Soon it was time to bathe the corpse. Four or five able bodied men, carried it to the cot kept in the northern corner. There were two huge copper pots filled with water, one hot, the other cold.

The cleaned corpse was laid on the mat and wrapped in a new cloth. Before that, the naked body was sprinkled with henna leaves. As Eramullan tied the three knots, the crowd watched in silence. Closing the panels of the bier he asked:

"Shall we start?"

"La Illaha Illalla"

With that, there was more wailing from inside the house. It sounded brittle, like broken music, from the blunt needle of an old gramophone.

The funeral procession passed through lanes, paddy fields and roads and gradually inched its way towards the mosque. Eramullan trudged like a tail at the rear of the procession. Behind the bier the gathering was immersed in prayer.

After the funeral, when the last headstone was raised amidst the nochil, people dispersed. The grave diggers wiped their muddy hands on the wages and were on their way. Eramullan was still waiting for his fees.

Mammad Haji's son took a last look at his father's grave and Eramullan stood watching him. Soon the son walked away without looking at Eramullan. When he reached the road, Eramullan walked faster and nudged him from behind.

"Umm.....?"

Eramullan felt the whole world collapsing around him. The other man's reaction was haughty and hard. "Umm....?, he grunted widening his saucer - sized eyes. Seeing his dark face Eramullan's world slipped into darkness. Yet Eramullan said

"My wages for washing......?"

"Tomorrow", muttering just one word, the other man walked on. After a long walk he reached the bend in the road and disappeared around it. Eramullan stood still for a long time and then he too began to walk - not towards the road but towards his shelter - the mosque.

2

When unwed Neeli big with child, fell to the floor in a faint, her father came down the porch with a chopper in his hand. Shaking his matted hair and brandishing the big knife in his, hand he pranced like a caged civet on the veranda. When the chopper in his hand brushed against the thatch, rotting wood and dead leaves crumbled to the ground.

Planting himself like an oracle in front of his daughter, Rairu roared.

"You better name him. I'll take his guts and yours out with cleaver. Beware of Rairu".

But Neeli could not answer him, her lips were parched, open and drooping. Her eyes were shut and her face was as white as paper. Once in a while, her small round breast heaved. With her ankles sticking out of her mundu she lay limp like a lily pulled out of the water.

A brutal blow from her husband had landed Neeli's mother on the floor. She was sobbing, her moaning was louder than that of the jackals from the flower - dotted meadow.

When Rairu threw the cleaver out, that long abused tool broke into two. The blade fell in one place and the handle in another. He screamed again, circling around his wife like an animal.

"Shut up, don't you make a sound - you bitch. I will kill you. If you were any good, would this have happened? Answer me, you whore....."

When he shook his first in the air, the callous in his palm - the reward of years of honest work in the smithy - crushed in his clenched fist.

"O, my Rairu, please don't do anything stupid", warned his old mother sitting in a corner of the varanda. As she stood up to go to him, her old long cloth began to slip from her wrist. Holding on to that with one hand she began to walk towards him.

"If I had my eye - sight none of these would have happened. Arakkal Bagavathy, protect us" She murmured on her way.

The kerosene lamp in the niche of the wall was dying. As the red flame went out, the incomplete graffiti it had tried to etch for so long on the wall, the veranda and its occupants sank into darkness.

Rairu leaned on the wall and slipped to the floor, all worn out. Despite the December wind he was soaked in sweat. Long tortured sighs heaved out of his body. It frightened his young children. They shrank to a corner in the veranda trying to sleep on a small piece of palm leaf. Though their eyes were shut tight their ears were wide open.

No one said anything. Neeli's grandmother couldn't sit still. Completely at a loss, she kept calling her God.

Then she got up and went to Neeli. She was still lying like a rag doll on the floor. Holding and shaking her, the grandma called aloud,

"Neeli, my girl, get up"

Seeing that Neeli was still unconscious the grandma climbed down the crumbling steps to the well outside. Though the sky was glowing in the bright twilight, the horizon was fringed in darkness.

The old woman dumped the bucket into the well. As she pulled the water up, the wrinkled, scaly skin stretched over her ankles moved up and down. Pulling her feet out of the dirt, she wiped them on the grass and entered the house with some water in a coconut shell.

The house was as silent as a grave. Scooping a little water in her long, thin, bare hands the old woman wiped Neeli's face. As her time-worn fingers touched Neeli's flushed cheeks, her thoughts travelled down memory lane.

The old woman was not in the least resentful of Neeli. After all hadn't the same thing happened to her? Long ago how did she conceive Neeli's own father Rairu? The very thought of it sent tremors of joy down her spine. The pudamuri (the wedding ceremony) was after she had already missed her periods! When your loved one holds you by the hand how can you say no to him?

She remembered many more things. All her memories were

about her Velu who had held her close to his heart even before their wedding, Rairu's father, Velu. With a deep sigh she gazed at the mango tree in the southern of the yard for a long time.

Then she turned to Rairu who was leaning on the wall like a dark shadow. The misery of his grief filled the whole place. How else could her son react, he who had always spoken truth and walked on the right path. He knew no wrong. Every morning he got up before the cock crowed and walked four miles to the city. There he worked all day, turning gold to lovely jewelry. Her son who had touched nothing but pure gold all his life, no one had ever complained of being cheated by her son but what had befallen him now. O my God......... the old woman couldn't even let out a long sigh. Her lungs had grown feeble with years of coughing.

By now all the water from the coconut shell had dripped down on Neeli, through the small hole in its eye. Caressing her wet cheeks and chest the grandma laid Neeli's head on her lap and began to stroke her hair.

In the morning, the old woman woke up with a start. When she groped for Neeli all she found were the faint traces of oil from Neeli's head on her clean lap. When she looked around she saw Rairu still leaning on the wall and sleeping, his wife was on the floor with blackened face and two frightened younger kids lay huddled up on the mat in the corner.

The old woman got up in a hurry. She walked up and down the veranda looked in every direction and then went in, to search the house. When she came out, she called out in a broken voice . Neeli... Her pathetic bleat woke very one up. Rairu stood up with the repaired chopper in his hand. Thick spittle was still drooling out the corner of his mouth, shaking his head he asked.

"Where is that wretch?"

Hearing him roar Rairu's wife sprang up, panting like a worn out bitch in a famine infested land. She stood rubbing her eyes, her ribs sticking out, her breasts falling flat on her chest. Rushing at the women he thundered again:

"Where is she? Where have you stashed her away?" Rairu's wife could only weep but even tears were scarce, her sunken cheeks moved up and down with faint sighs.

Rairu ran around the house like a madman with the chopper in hand. Staring at her son in the frenzy of a 'velichappad' the old woman collapsed on the floor. She fell gently like a tiny butterfly. Rairu was there in an instant.

"Mother, if you were smart would this have happened?"

Running like a man possessed to the mango tree in the corner he stood near his father's grave for a long time. Then as the ants began to climb his legs, he began his search for Neeli again and ran around as if to wreak vengeance on both ants and man. All along he kept bellowing the same question.

"Where is she?" In short while, all his neighbours came running. Appukutty Marar's son Govindan who was practising to drum with a piece of log, came in with his sticks. Rairu took possession of one of them and now with a stick in one hand and the chopper in the other, he hollered.

"I will kill her".

Every one tried to placate him. Listening to all their good words Rairu was worn out. And the crowd dispersed, going off in search of Neeli.

3

Khan Bahadur Pookoya Thangal woke up in the morning hearing Eramullan's call for prayer. Stepping into his wooden slippers with the silver studs, he fastened his special Singapore lungi around him. Then he raised the wick of his kerosene lamp.

Thangal's wife Attabi was still sleeping, exhausted on the bed. Holding her fleshy shoulders, he called:

"Aate, wake up. They have already called for sohabi". Moaning and stretching, she slowly opened her lazy eyes.

"Brush your teeth and drink the holy water" instructed Thangal. Attabi had become pregnant after thirteen years of marriage. Now

Thangal was trying to protect the unborn baby from miscarriage or any other harm with both magic and medicine.

Thangal came out of his bedroom to open the door to the hall. As usual the door panels creaked loudly.

This palatial house with many rooms, iron safes, basement, attic and secret rooms had a unique feature about it. Its doors never made a sound when you closed them but they always opened with a loud groan. The big sound woke the many nephews and nieces, workers and servants, helpers and vassals of the house. A buddhist carpenter from Singapore had made that door. Not just the door but the entire house. However by the time the house was finished the carpenter was dead so he never got to see the inmates of the house or witness the housewarming ceremony of boiling the milk.

The house of Arakkal had never had a master as mighty as the Khan Bahadoor pookoya Thangal. These days, his name and fame was on every one's lips. The white man had bestowed him with the title of Khan Bahadoor for his philanthropic activities.

Pookoya Thangal's father, Attakoya, had a substantial business in Singapore. On each of his visits home he bought the land and fields around his property for a minimum price. Thus by the time of his death most of the village had become his, this made him the richest land lord, next only to the royal prince.

After Attakoya's death Pookoya Thangal took over the business and inherited the property. Now the business in Singapore doubled in value. Back at home he bought more and more property, not just land and field but forests and mountains as well. He renovated the house into a beautiful palace. The wide hallway that stretched the length of the house was studded with huge, carved pillars. Statues of dancing girls adorned the doors and brackets and the windows paneled with colored German glass. The smooth floor was made of pure marble. Plush carpets and a green ceiling complemented the lovely abode.

This noble house also had the right kind of people to dwell in it. Including Thangal's three sisters, their husbands and their children, more than thirty people lived and dined under that roof.

After amassing a fortune in Singapore for over ten years Thangal

returned with his money, a champion horse and a Buddhist horse trainer.

Thangal was not superstitious like his ancestors. His long stay in Singapore made him a progressive man yet he retained his faith in black magic.

When he walked down the road dressed in his striped Singapore lungi and Japanese silk shirt topped with a jacket, people around gazed at him in admiration - at his handsome face, handlebar mustache and his shiny shoes. The fragrance of the perfume from Singapore lingered on even after he left the place.

Listening to Eramullan's call for prayer Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal got up early in the morning. He squeezed some tooth paste onto his brush and started his daily ablutions. His servants had spread a strange rumor in the village, that Thangal used soap to brush his teeth.

After wiping his face with a Turkish towel. Thangal sat on his chair. Instantly Hydrose, the servant boy arrived with a steaming cup of rich tea. With that the day began. Downing his tea, Thangal started his namaz with great energy. With hands folded on his chest, bending, kneeling and remembering Allah, Thangal got off the prayer mat and called.

"Hey Andraman!"

The Buddhist horse-trainer from Singapore came running as if woken from the dead. He lead the horse from its stable to the marble from porch of the house. By now Thangal had changed into his khaki riding breeches. Stroking the animal with his strong hands, Thangal mounted the horse like a mate. The horse raced through the gate beyond the mosque grounds, nochil fields and big roads to the beach. Thangal never rode beyond his own field and forest. When the horse finally reached the sandy shores pulling its hooves up with great difficulty it trotted around many huts and then stopped in front of one.

The morning star was not yet out. Kissing the horse on its neck Thangal jumped lightly down. There was no light in the hut. The men were away at sea. Thangal scratched on the door and it opened directly.

Out came a naked bosom, then the two bodies disappeared into the hut.

By the time the day grew bright and shiny, Thangal was back at his gate. Seeing him Buhari-the security man at the gate-house snuffed out his beedi. Stamping out his puff at the sight of his master is something Buhari had always done. As they crossed the gate, Andraman came to receive the horse. He patted its face, wiped the frothing mouth with his right hand and scolded the animal at length with affection.

Thangal had already gone for his bath. Now the sweet smell of his soap filled the whole house. After the bath, securing his lungi over his paunch and drying his hair Thangal reached the front of the house. By now his relatives and associates were quite ready for breakfast. As they waited for Thangal their hands, washed in preparation for breakfast, became dry again. The servant boy waited patiently for the empty dishes.

The men around the food fought for their share and stuffed in as much as they could till their eyes watered. Then belching aloud they got up to wash their hands.

Discussion on various topics was next on the agenda. This was the routine every day. Thangal sat on his big chair and the servants and other associates on the marble floor. Then they deliberated over harvesting, travel, feast, litigation and everything under the sun. At the end of it all, with a long puff at his cigar the Thangal asked.

"Is that how it should be Kanara?"

"Yes" Bappukanaran would answer in the affirmative.

Bappukanaran had to approve of all plans. The approval of his most trusted manager. Bappukanaran who stood resolutely with him on all issues was very important to Thangal. He had been with him for over ten years, when they were in Singapore, it was he who had advised Thangal to return home. This was the turning point in his life.

By the time the discussions were over it was already noon. After his siesta Thangal got up, and drank a cup of tea seasoned with mint. Then dressed in his ironed white Jubba, pyjama and immaculate cap he went out for his evening walk. He was accompanied by Andraman, Aamad Seethi, Mohammed kunji,

Poochonakkan and the Mukri. As they were strolling along, talking and joking with each other, they saw something.

Some one was lying face down at his father Attakoya's mausoleum.

Suddenly all talking came to a stop. Every one moved closer to the tomb. The mosque ground grew dark and a whiff of sandal wood scent swept the air.

Seeing a girl Thangal stood dazed for a moment. Then he touched the unconscious body.

"Oh" she's alive' said he, as if waking from a dream.

"Kanara, call your wife. It is not right for us to touch a woman".

Then it was sheer commotion. People ran in every direction. Some came back with cold water to sprinkle on her face. Some others took her to be a she devil and ran in fear.

By now Bappukanaran's Theeayathi Pooki had reached the tomb. The two of them together lifted the unconscious girl.

4

On a chair brought from somewhere Thangal sat in front of Bappukkanaran's house with one leg on top of another. His servants sat on a mat spread on the floor. As every one sat in complete silence eagerly watching every move trying to make out what was happening inside, Kanaran's wife shot out like Arjuna's arrow, and announced.

"She is conscious!"

"God, your mercy", said Thangal as he got up, "Did she say anything?" he asked.

"No, she just opened her eyes and moved her lips," said Pokki.

In the meantime Mukri Eramullan was sitting on a broken bench outside the house. He was making an amulet with a black thread. By the time he tied the hundred and one knot and blew a spell for each, the black small string became all we. Now pushing his hand

into the room he said.

"Here tie this on her right hand above the elbow. It can drive any Iphreeth or Jinnaway".

Kanaran's wife took the string, tied it on the patient and sprinkled a bit more of the holy water on her face. By now a lot of men and women had reached the house and they crowded in every nook and corner. When Thangal went in he saw a dark and lovely face. The girl's thick long hair was spread on the mat and her bosom was not covered.

"First things first, put a blouse on her. I just don't like this. Holy water can wait," said Thangal.

In those days except for the Nair women no one else covered the upper part of their body. The progressive, Singapore returned Thangal could not tolerate this practice, he decided to change the custom by making the women under him wear blouses. He brought yards and yards of cotton material and arranged for a tailor to come to his house to stitch a lot of blouses. The first blouse to each woman was given by Thangal himself. Looking at the women covering their chest from within the walls of her house, Thangal's Bibi was overwhelmed with happiness.

In spite of all these elaborate arrangements, Pokki had so far refused to wear a blouse. One day, on one of his daily evening rounds Thangal came upon Pokki on the road. Seeing her with just a mundu upset him. In more of an of obsession than anger, he muttered " I will make her wear a blouse alright. But for that we will need to do something else."

One Tuesday evening on a market day Pokki was slowly coming down the road with a basket full of things on her head. A lot of people were going up and down the main road. Thangal and his joking entourage spotted Pokki opposite them. Then Thangal murmured something to two urchins.

Immediately they ran to Pokki and stopped her on the road, then they stretched themselves up to put their hands on her breasts. A totally startled Pokki dropped her basket and ran and the children followed close behind.

"So it was not useless to have had these kids with us the whole day" commented Thangal looking at his guffawing companions.

The only person who didn't laugh was Bappukanaran.

After this incident there was not a single woman to be seen in the neighborhood without a blouse. After all this trouble how could Thangal tolerate this young woman's toplessness even though she was a stranger there.

Pokki opened her trunk, took out a blouse, and with great difficulty she managed to put it on the young woman.

Thangal looked at the weary lass lying on the mat in the dull light of the Amoky lamp.

"Now give her something to drink", ordered Thangal

"Yes", said Kanaran.

Someone brought a bowl full of hot 'kanji water'. Propped up with one hand on the mat, she drank the whole thing up one gulp.

"Now you tell us your name" Thangal ordered again. Leaning on her arms and sitting in an angle she looked at Thangal, the flame dancing in her moist red eyes.

"Don't worry. I am here to help you. Just let us know your name"

Looking at Thangal's fair fleshy face, his moustache and huge, Arabic eyes she said: "Neeli"

"A very good name. I like it a lot. And where are you from?"

With that Neeli began to sob. She fell back on the mat.

"Alright. The rest you can tell us in the morning."saying this, Thangal got out and began to walk.

"Kanaran you better stay here. If there is anything more to be done you let me know" Before he could cover ten yards Bappukanaran came running behind.

"Hmm, what happened?" Thangal turned around to ask.

"The girl, she is pregnant"

"Who said so?"

"The midwife All that noise had brought her to our house, she felt all over the girl's stomach and found out."

As Thangal stood in silence Kanaran repeated the fact.

"It is the truth Thangal."

This made him angry.

"So what you devil! If she is pregnant let her give birth. There are able midwives in this village to help her". Then he walked away.

"Yes". Even to shoulder responsibility for her pregnancy? Kanaran wanted to yell. But his hand covered his mouth. The hand that fed the mouth. Kanaran returned to his house with his head bent low.

On his way home Thangal didn't speak to anyone. All the while he was thinking about the pregnant girl from God knows where and his own pregnant wife.

When he reached his bedroom his Bibi was already asleep. He raised the flame of the lamp. She seemed all washed out, he took looking at her big belly under the night dress. The bulging stomach moved with each breath. Thinking of his seed growing within her he was in a tumult of excitement.

He marvelled at her glorious conception after thirteen years of monotonous waiting. Her first pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage on a fateful day. A piece of papaya was the cause of it all. On the fourteenth night of the lunar calendar his Bibi sat in the backyard looking at the silver bright sky. When she saw the moon beams streaming down the leaves of the papaya tree she had a sudden craving to eat a piece of the fruit. He went to the tree with a long hooked stick and poked with the hook at the stem of a big fruit. It fell down with shudder, dripping papaya milk from the broken-end. As she ate the fruit his Bibi stared at the drops of milk glistening in the moon. Then suddenly, a pain started in the abdomen, neither magic nor medicine could remedy the cursed papaya.

All this was a long time ago. His mind filled with memories. Thangal got out of the room and walked across the garden to the gate. Then he called out to the watchman Buhari. What had happened to that man who slept there every night he wondered. But he didn't stop long. From there he went to the mosque grounds. There it was pitch dark except for the glowing fire flied dancing around the nochil bushes.

The light in the mosque was still on. The water winch was groaning like a long suffering patient and Eramullan was busy filling the tank.

"Aren't you in bed Eramullan?" Hearing Thangal's voice in the middle of the night, Eramullan dropped the rope from his hand. The winch rose with a groan, hitting him and the bucket bounced against his chin.

Thangal continued "You do one thing. You go up to Bappukanaran's house and tell him not to give any papaya curry to that girl who is there".

Eramullan was completely puzzled. He couldn't understand a thing. For that matter he hadn't heard anything. His ears were still ringing with the groan and his chin was smarting. He looked down into the deep dark well.

'Dey' Thangal called again,

"Yes, Sir?"

"Did you understand?"

'No....No.'

Furious, Thangal crushed his palms together, what could he do with his anger?

"Look here" Thangal started again. "A girl has come to Kanaran's house. Tell them not to give any curried papaya to her."

Now Eramullan was running. Blocking him

Thangal asked.

"Have you understood"

"Yes" Said Eramullan.

Thangal explained in exasperation.

"That young woman, in their house, she is pregnant."

Staring at Eramullan's saucer sized eyes Thangal asked again,

"What?"

"Pregnant!" replied Eramullan.

5

Arakkal Thangal's private burial ground stretches over two acres of land. Anyone dying within a radius of four miles around it, is entombed there. The whole area is a jungle filled with snakes and other poisonous creatures, guarded by spirits and ghosts. Each time they dig a new grave, they have to first clear the forest. When time usurps the graves in the form of wilderness, they are razed to make room for the new comers.

The Thangals have a special place of their own for their rest. They are not buried near the graves of the ordinary mussalman.

People of all faith come with offerings to the sepulchre of the Thangal who blessed them with miracles. Usually they give the Mukri coconut oil as offering during Muharam and light incense near the tomb in thanks giving.

Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal's father was a godly man. His tomb stone was almost always surrounded with burning incense sticks. If anyone in the village ever suffered from a mild sickness immediately they would offer to burn incense at Saiyid Thangal's tomb. Please heal by Umma's mouth sores! Please cure my Theeyan's stomach ache; Grant my Nair some good sense! Return my son to me please.....thus went their petitions to the saint.

As the cries for help rent the air, the suppliants pain would ease. Those were the days when he seemed to grant a lot of favors to his petitioners. He made the lame walk, the dumb talk, impregnated barren women and cured the most persistent eczema. But the greatest miracle of all was the coming of the Railway station. Trains then would stop only after running for fifty to sixty kilometers. So when Thangal travelled to Singapore he had to first go to Kozikode to catch a train to Madras. As there were no cars or buses it was pretty hard for him to get to Kozikode with all the luggage from his house.

Jatuka being the main means of transportation, the normal practice was to get Mammaukkey's Jatuka from Talassery, stuff it with all the luggage and then proceed to Kozikode.

Once, it was time for Thangal to go to Singapore. The man who went to make the arrangements with Keya came back with the news that he had gone on an important mission to Kasargode. Thangal had to start his journey the very next day. Even if he were to walk all the way to Kozikode, there was not enough time to reach his destination. A day's delay would mean a three months long wait for the next ship to Singapore.

Thangal was in a panic. In fact the whole country side was troubled. Every one was worried about the problem of his travel but not once did Thangal show his anxiety to others. Sitting in the front of his house, with a pasted smile on his graying mustache he held court as usual, seeing this, a man in the crowd asked him hesitantly.

"We are worried about your trip, aren't you going this time?"

Thangal pulled out the cigar from between his pouting lips, tapped the ash off, took another long puff and said.

"Yes I am going to Kozikode by train"

"By train!" Every one gasped in astonishment.

"That's right. By train!"

"Don't tease us, Thangal" said they in a chorus.

"Who's joking? I never joke especially when I am serious; Arakkal Attakoya is going to take the train tomorrow!"

Early next morning all the things to be taken to Singapore were neatly bundled up-the Mussel for prayer, the spittoon, the special water pot with pipe attached, the pillow, the long robe, and the jars of pickle were neatly arranged in the trunks. At ten o'clock people from all over gathered to send Thangal off but they were all rather puzzled. How an earth is he going to get to Madras? Slowly the waiting crowd fell silent.

Exactly at 10.30 Thangal looked towards his servants, they were standing around like African slaves.

"Come on!" At his command; carrying the boxes and bundles they walked behind Thangal first to the gate and then to the mosque grounds, heading down the narrow roads, they finally reached the railway tracks. While the servants were expecting an order to walk

all the way to Kozikode, Thangal said.

"Put the things down here"

They arranged the luggage by the side of the railway track and then the big group of people fell behind it in an orderly manner.

The iron tracks were blazing in the sizzling summer sun. Not one tree was in sight to spread a little shade. Far ahead where the tracks ended, heat seemed to melt into boiling columns to touch the sky.

Suddenly there was a whistle and the train appeared, like a black branding mark at the end of the scorching railway track.

Thangal stood with his eyes closed. He seemed to be murmuring some magic words; roaring and racing, darting and dashing, panting and bolting the train rushed towards them. Suddenly it whistled, a long slow whistle at the end of which the train seemed to be completely worn out. Now the rumbling dropped, the speed lessened and the wheels dulled slowly putting an end to the sparks flying off the tracks. As gracefully and as light as a bird the train halted in front of Thangal and his companions. As Thangal opened his eyes the guard with a flag in his hand jumped down from the back end of the train. And the driver with soot all over him jumped from the front end.

People were looking out of every window some spat out. Thangal boarded the bogie next to the engine and shouted at the crew staring at him in sheer wonder and anxiety.

"What are you gawking at, you devils? Put luggage in the train, it will move now".

The driver, worried about the train didn't see Thangal get into the compartment. But the guard spotted him. Seeing the guard walk towards him, Thangal opened his eyes, smiled and said.

"You may start now!"

While the incredulous guard opened his mouth, Thangal continued.

"Don't bother to speak, just start the train". Though the guard wanted to question him Thangal's gleaming eyes and towering presence rendered him dumb; all that moved was his hand waving

his green flag. And driver started the engine.

Then the miracle of miracles happened - train began to move. The incident became the talk of the place and a station was built in honour of Thangal on the same spot. That is how the present station master became the first railway official there.

6

Attabi was in the beginning of her seventh month. On the auspicious day of the cord tying ceremony, she spent hours in the toilet, washing up with all the water the servants had poured into the copper pots. As the water flowing out of the bathroom spread and sank to the earth the oil and soap bubbles lingered on the top. Then one by one the bubbles burst, leaving a film of oil.

After her bath, Bibi tied the new cord on, and bent down to look at the red silk cord below her smooth, round belly. Then suddenly feeling a sense of repulsion, she put her clothes on and came out in her silk mundu, silk bodice top and veil. Water dropping down her thick hair made patterns on her veil - soon the blot of dampness spread.

Seating her on a bed in the inner courtyard Bibis and the muslim women from the entire neighborhoods sat around her. As it was dark in there Hydrose the servant boy came in with a lighted lamp. Climbed on to a small stool and hung the lamp on a nail hanging from the ceiling . Then Kuraisi pathu arrived with silver bowl full of henna.

Kuraisi pathu was the queen of the kitchen. There were almost fifteen domestic maids in that house hold. Their ages ranging from seven to seventy they could even be called a tribe judging by their complex problems and their simple food.

All day long they lived in and around the kitchen and its garden. At night they slept in the dark rooms on either side of the kitchen. The duck and the chickens slept in their cages.

Pathu was the 'Chief' of everything. Each one had a special task allotted to her: grinding, pounding, looking after the ducks and

hens, drawing water from the well, washing clothes, splitting wood, drying grains (paddy) chasing the cows, going to the stores to buy small provisions like green chillies and soap and so on. Pathu decided on the chores according to each one's ability and age. What the maids had in common was the soot on their face.

But today there was no hint of kitchen on Pathu as she entered the room with well scrubbed face. Her clean clothes were neatly ironed. The strong smell of cheap attar accompanied her. Only the dirt under her finger nails stuck out like black half moons.

Pathu herself was the first one to draw a design on Bibi's left palm. Soon the Bibis hand was filled with henna. Later everyone in the group decorated her little finger on the left with henna. Then they waited for the henna to turn a dark orange, all the while munching arecanut and spitting into the spittoon in the middle of the room.

Appakkari Kadisa who was busy frying neyyappam in the kitchen came into the room with the first appam dripping with ghee in a dark iron spatula. The rich brown appam was still steaming. Everyone stared at it. The shape of the first neyyappam they believed would determine the sex of the child.

"Baby girl" shouted Muthibi at the top of her voice. Muthibi was the respectable old woman who got invited to every house every feast. The lady with no relatives spent her days in prayer. Once a year she fasted for a month, drinking just enough water to keep he r alive; her words were highly valued by the people.

The whole group repeated "girl............girl" in a sing a long. Then it was all a rush.....lot of talk, spittoons filling up. A big arm parted the drapes to pass the Attar. The dark curled hair on the arm seemed to glow in the dark.

Kuraisipathu received the Attar. The bottle was smaller than that of a new born babies little finger. It was sealed with a cork. With the help of a sewing needle and with great difficulty she uncorked the bottle. Then covering the rim with her index finger she tipped the bottle upside down. The first dab was of course on Attabi. By the time she smeared a drop on everyone's clothes Pathu was thoroughly worn out.

"Stop" she said to the figure behind the drapes.

"I don't want any Attar." he said

"Not that," she said and moved closer to curtains with the silver bowl in her hand. As she smothered his little finger in henna she was in a strange ecstasy.

"O my, I am hungry." announced Muthabi. With that everyone's stomach began to growl.

Soon it was time for the feast. The women sat in a circle. Seeing that a few were still left out, someone announced from a corner.

"Squeeze in, crowd a little more". The women crowded and pushed themselves between the fat and thin forming a throbbing human chain, and waited for food.

Soon platters full of neyappam and ghee rice were brought out. But the servant took it straight to the front of the house without as much as a glance at them, there were a lot of people waiting for food there too. Finally Kurasipathu came in with a big pan full of neyyappam. As she pushed herself into the circle, the aroma of coconut oil and jaggery filled the air.

The chairs moved, arms adorned with bangles stretched out and the women closed in on the food like the petals of a lotus flower. When the dinner was over, the music concert started. First a few notes on the harmonium, then military Ibrahim opened his mouth wide. The men, now stuffed with food began to beat time. When Thangal walked into the inner room, he asked in surprise.

"What is this? No noise of any kind at all?"

That alerted the singers from Badakara. In a few seconds they grouped themselves into a circle. The group had both old and young women in it. But they were all dressed the same way, big red bordered kachi that flutted in the breeze to reveal the singer's ankles, loose upper garments with no lingerie under it and a veil. Flushed cheeks and red lips. The palms of their hands were the same; long years of clapping had made them firm with callouses.

Now they surged ahead like Nair soldiers in war; clapping the hands of their opponents they sang and danced till they were about to collapse. Their dress clung to their torso. The plate in the middle of the musicians circle was filling up with coins, when a silver coin was dropped, the gift energized the sweat drenched singers. They

began to sing with more sound and melody.

When Hydrose brought 'Kawa' seasoned with pepper, jaggery and cardamom in dainty Singapore, China, the songs came to an end. And the pretty hands reached for the kawa cups.

7

On a cold winter morning in December Pookoyathangal came out into the yard in his jeans and shirt. Generally by the time he reached the front part of his house. Andraman was there with the horse. But today there was no sign of Andraman or his horse. Thangal looked up at the sky. The half-moon still bathed his house with its cool light. Suddenly a dark cloud from the westend floated across the sky and hid the moon behind it, spreading darkness. Andraman was still nowhere to be seen. Soon Thangal's moustache went up and there was anger in his baritone voice.

"Hey! Andraman"

From his quarters beyond the stable, Andraman appeared looking like a shadow in the pale light of the setting moon. Walking slowly he reached the front of the house. He looked miseràble, a pathetic sight. His flat nose seemed flatter than ever. His beady eyes were filled with light from the lamp and his narrow forehead was covered with drops of sweat. He stood sobbing in front of Thangal.

Thangal was startled to see Andraman cry! This was the first time he had ever seen him cry. Andraman's heart was forever filled with his master's love. In the fullness of his guardian's protection Andraman had no sorrow, so he didn't cry when his wife committed suicide or when they cut her up into pieces or even when he left his homeland for distant shores.

But now, he was crying. Hiding his incredulity Thangal went to Andraman who was once a buddhist and contrary to his usual brisk manner inquired very gently about the great tragedy that seemed to have afflicted him.

"Andraman, why are you crying?"

For a while Andraman couldn't speak. Then he stammered.

"My ....my horse".

He couldn't go any further. He had never referred to the horse as "my horse!" From the day it landed in India in a ship from Singapore he had talked about it as Khan Bahadoor's horse. He had never tried to stamp his individuality on anything. To him even his religious conversion was a matter changing caps in Ponnani. Generally, his personality just merged into the shadow of the other. So when he used the phrase 'my horse' Thangal was considerably surprised. However without flexing a single muscle on his face Thangal asked.

"Tell me Andraman, what happened to the horse?"

Narrowing his eyes to a squint and in great distress Andraman replied.

"The horse has diarrhoea!" Thangals immediate reaction was to bark. "So what?"

"The horse, it is not walking" stammered Andraman. Without uttering a word Thangal walked to the stable; Andraman was at his heels. But they couldn't get into the room the stink was so strong. When Thangal flashed his torch to take a look inside the stable filled with dung it appeared more like a pond. He looked at the horse lying on the floor its eyes were sunk deep and its mane tangled in a heap. There was no time to waste. Any further delay would kill the horse.

"Wake up, everyone. Up and about" Thangal ordered.

Servants sleeping all around the house were up. Nephews sleeping inside the house were awake too. But they didn't get up. The affairs in the house didn't bother them in the least.

"Go call Bappukanaran". Whenever he faced a difficulty, Thangal sent for Bappukanaran. All important issues of the house was discussed with him. Now his horse, the horse that he loved more than his Bibi, the imported horse from Singapore, the horse that took him for ride and other pleasures had collapsed on the floor and he needed no one but Bappukanaran. Within seconds Bappukanaran was by his side.

"What's up" he asked quite surprised at the unearthly hour of this summons.

"The horse is down with diarrhoea. Quickly send for Komappan Vaidyar" replied Thangal.

A man was immediately dispatched to Mukkali.

Komappan Vaidyar was the potent medicine man who treated both men and beast in that terrain. The Vaidyar who considered, Charaka and Susrutha as God incarnate knew his Astanga Hrydya like the palm of his hand. He could conquer any disease. He was the death of all disease. If any one did die while being treated by him, that was attributed to the patient's short life span.

This Vaidyar practised all the one hundred and one techniques prescribed in Ayurveda. He knew the potency of each medicine and he could juggle with the life of his patients.

Within an hour the Vaidyar had crossed the threshold of Arakkal house. He left his palm-roofed umbrella in the veranda. He never ventured anywhere without his umbrella.

Looking at the impatient Thangal pacing up and down the front of the house the Vaidyar announced himself.

"Here I am at your service".

Instantly released of his emotions of annoyance and anger, Thangal melted under the compassion of the doctor pleaded.

"Please save my horse!" Komappa Vaidyar walked to the stable. Though the sun was up in the sky there was no light in the stable. Holding his nose with his finger he called out.

"Light"

A wick went up and someone came in with a number fourteen lamp. Komappa Vaidyar looked all over the horse then placing his left hand on its stomach he touched it with the right hand. The stable resounded with a 'dhum' sound. Next he lifted the tail to peer at the back. Then Andraman warned.

"Be careful, it might kick." dropping the tail back to its rightful place the Vaidyar came to and asked for writing palm.

Thangal gave a sheet of first class paper neatly arranged on a wooden board, and a fountain pen to the Vaidyar. Holding the pen in his hand the Vaidyar puffed his cheeks to a fill before exclaiming.

"Good fountain!"

Then lifting his head, he asked Thangal.

"Does it leak?"

Wide-eyed with surprise, Thangal assured him.

"You may open the pen without fear. The ink in its flows only when you write."

Then praying to both Charaka and Susrutha and thanking the Astanga Hrydya in his mind the Vaidyar began to write, giving the prescription to Thangal, he said.

"Take some pitted kadukka, tannikka and gooseberry. To this add one and a half measure of ginger and snakegourd, mix it with one measure of camphor, rasnadipowder, root of a red coconut tree, parijatha flower, arsina berry and chekki flower without its stamen, add two measures adalodakam, kurumthoti and narayaoot. Grind it to a fine powder, then grind again with donkey's milk and strain it. Then stuff this concoction in the shell of a dhatura, tie it up with palm fibres and boil it for three hours in cow's urine. Then remove it from the pot blend it with wild honey from the forests of wynad and give it twice to the patient."

Open-mouthed Thangal received the prescription.

The Vaidyar stood up." Let me take leave of you,' with his umbrella in hand he was about to go.

Thangal stood up with something in his hand.

"Money for us? Not at all".

"You should accept something" pleaded Thangal.

"In that case give me that pen, I can use it to write prescriptions, for others."

When Thangal took the pen from his pocket and offered it to the Vaidyar he put it in his pouch picked up his umbrella and went down the steps.

By noon the medicine was ready. It had to be given only once. After that there was no motion and Thangal didn't allow them to give a second dose.

When evening came Andraman was sent to rest. He was the one who did all the work to prepare the medicine. Later when the horse felt healthy enough to eat his grain Andraman was happy, enough to drink his kanji.

8

When Eramullan doused the flame to go to bed the last light in the village was out.

Khan Bahadoor Pookoyathangal couldn't get any sleep at all. He had seen the light go out all of a sudden. Night after night he worried about his Bibi. When would she deliver? Would it be safe? Hadn't many women perished in child birth? Would something like that happen to his Bibi? So went his worries. To top it all there was not a single doctor available anywhere around. The nearest physician was in Kozikode and that was a lady doctor. From Palghat, she abstained from fish; she was an alluring lady with a magnetic personality.

It was Barrister Kunji Raman who first talked about her to Thangal. Lawyer Kunji Raman always won all his cases., both civil and criminal. He was a terror who pecked his opponents like a prize fighter.

Alamelu's husband was also a lawyer. But he dealt only in minor cases. Eight annas was what he charged as his fees. The pocket of his lawyer's black robe was always filled with roasted peanuts and he munched them all the time, if possible even during hearing. Lawyer Kunji Raman and Alamelu's husband had gone to the same law school in Madras. Kunji Raman recounted his trip to Kozikode on one of his visits to his friend Thangal.

Once when Kunji Raman was practicing in Telicherry he received a letter from Alamelu's husband to visit him in Calicut. So he got into his horse cart to see his friend.

Swamy was a strict vegetarian but he drank foreign liquor; with that he liked to have pappads, vadai and pakoras made of colacasia leaves dipped in besan batter, and deep fried in fine ghee. Space permitting he would top it off with a little curd rice .

On that special occasion also they had drinks. They celebrated their happy meeting with drinking a lot, eating a lot and talking a lot.

Soon Swamy began to vomit. Then he laid his head into the regurgiated liquor and curd rice and fell asleep.

It was then that Alamelu appeared in her lingerie to take a look at the lawyer who was sitting like a bull; with that one look she floored him.

Seeing her perfect figure, Kunji Raman was ecstatic. He just couldn't resist her for another moment. Together they walked to the adjacent room. He left only after fully satisfying her.

Kunji Raman described these facts in detail to Thangal; after all both of them were Casanovas in search of amorous adventure. Thangal remembered it clearly. He first pictured Alamelu as a doctor and them as a woman and he longed to become her patient. But he was torn by the contradictory emotions warring in him. Prospects of pleasure on one hand and omens of tragedy on the other.

He got out to the garden and looked up; above him the sky was aglow with thousands of twinkling stars. Then he looked down to the earth to his house and the graveyard beyond.

Suddenly he heard a pleasant tingle of bangles from Andraman's quarters; someone was talking. It must be around one. Wasn't Andraman sleeping? Who was he with? Was that the voice of a woman? Silently Thangal walked up to Andraman's room, next to the stable and what he saw in there thrilled him. So Andraman was not just a block of wood as he seemed to be. He was indeed with a woman; Thangal couldn't believe his eyes but who was she? who would dare to come to his house in the middle of the night for a rendezvous with his horseman? A flame began to burn with in him but he put it out. Leaving only the smoke behind. Abandoning his sleep and quenching the leaping flames of desire, he decided to wait and see.

After all whoever it was she had to come out of the room before morning.

Without making any sound Thangal brought an easy chair to the garden and made himself comfortable on it. For a while everything was quiet, then suddenly like the flash of an electric light their whispering broke the silence.

Andraman and the woman both must be spent, thought Thangal. He kept staring at the light in the sky and the darkness in the year. He thought of the gods and the ghosts.

Then he heard the door opening and the tinkle of bangles. He saw a shadow moving towards the kitchen.

"Stop right there". The boom of Thangal's voice shattered the silence. The shadow stopped without a sound or movement. Thangal got up from his chair and walked slowly towards the figure in womanly attire. He lit a match, what he saw first was the beads of perspiration on her forehead, then he saw her face. She was trying hard to melt into the thick shadow of the tree.

The woman who was supposed to keep the whole lot of the domestic help under control. Thangal's first impulse was to call her by name and to give her an earful. But he didn't say anything. Instead he called Andraman.

"Come out, you son of bitch"

Andraman came out trembling. Thangal couldn't see his face or the expression on it but he could see that Andraman was shivering like a man afflicted with malaria. His legs seemed to carry the burden of all the pleasures he had enjoyed so far.

"Dey Andraman!" roared Thangal

"Yes sir"

"Tomorrow is your wedding. We don't like whoring around here" he announced.

9

It was a Andraman's wedding day. Every one had left after the ceremony Thangal was the last to go. As he left with the light in his hand he joked. "Andraman, all your whims and desires should be fulfilled today."

Andraman smiled showing his tobacco stained teeth.

It was quiet everywhere. Andraman waited for Kuraisi pathu in a room filled with sandalwood fragrance in his new clothes. The alpal kurta and the singapore were Thangal's gift. Pathu came in with a glass of milk in hand. Her blouse was made of very delicate cotton, sheer gossamer, under it he could see her throbbing ample bosom.

Andraman was roused, his excitement spread climbing up and up like the ants - only in one direction. He had held her in his arms many times before. But today she was his bride.

Andraman took the glass from her but he didn't feel like drinking the milk. So he kept it on the window sill. The moon above was mirrored in the milk. Andraman touched her. The heady smell of Attar and the smooth feel of her face against his cheeks sent him into a rapture, a feeling of ecstasy that drained him. In a minute the Singapore lungi was all dirty and Andraman was sweating. Exhausted he fell on the bed and Pathu stood close to him.

It is terribly hot!", she said and took off her top. Her nakedness caressed him . But Andraman had nothing left in him to be aroused. He didn't even think of Pathu. All he thought of was his horse stomping its hoof and shitting in the stable.

Hours passed by. Andraman couldn't sleep, not because of his bride's beauty, her sweet smell or the softness of the bed but because he was longing for the rough bed in the room next to the stable where thousands of bed bugs anxiously waited for him.

How could he sleep away from his beloved horse without the smell of its dung and urine.

He got up from his bed. Pathu was fast asleep. He looked out of the window. A full moon. Its golden smile was now and then

darkened by some clouds sailing in from the east.

He got out of the cottage, across the ground littered with cigar butts, beedi pieces and betal leaves, and walked past the shadows of the coconut tree.

Pathu didn't follow him but the moon beams walked beside him; walking faster and faster he reached the gate. Just as he reached them the gates were open. Buhari, beedi in hand stared at him in wonder. Andraman was surprised too 'Doesn't this Buhari ever sleep?' he wondered. The gates closed behind him and the glow of the beedi became visible. Andraman walked on without stopping to chat with Buhari. Welcomed by the odour of the stable he went in, the horse kicked around and the night was suddenly filled with the flame of life.

The hornless horse was in a deep sleep. It was standing as usual with eyes shut and ears limp.. He stroked the horse on the ribs and woke it. The horse opened its eyes. Sniffing him the horse smiled and so did Andraman.

From the mosque came the groan of the water winch and Eramullan's cough. Andraman decided that poor Eramullan was still awake, only when the winch groaned endlessly was he convinced that the water was overflowing. Eramullan draws water till every muscle in his body aches with exhaustion, thought Andraman as he spread his mat on the cot. Sleeping on that hard surface, on top of the bed bugs Andraman climbed down the steps of sleep. As far as he was concerned the night had become busy again.

The Mukri's night too had come alive. All night long he drew water thinking of Pathu. Years ago, when Pathu was only fourteen, it was Eramullan who had married her first. Then he was not a Mukri of the mosque but a vendor of fish; sweating and calling out, he used to earn with basketful of sardines and mackerels on his head from Madapally beach all the way to Kuttiyadi, sixteen miles away. He must have been around twenty. The fourteen years old Pathu came everyday to the kitchen gate to buy fish for the Arakkal family. Gazing into her eyes, he would lift heaps of fish to give her. When they realised that they were getting a lot of fish for very little money people in the house became inquisitive. That is how Eramullan managed to marry Pathu despite of lot of opposition.

But he was not destined to spend even a day with Pathu. On their very first night, when he touched her Pathu pushed him aside and complained.

"Smelling........."

"Of what?"

"Fish ." said Pathu. The word was like a slap on the face.

With that Eramullan left the room. He never touched a basket of fish or Pathu again. The day after she said 'no' to him Eramullan left for Ponnani to learn scriptures. Staying in the mosque, half, starving he learned his prayers and Koran for three years by the light of the kerosene lamp. By the time he came back to the present the well was almost dry. The palm of his hand was cracked and bleeding.

10

To sell pepper, it had to be taken to Telicherry. Pookoya Thangal had sacks full of black pepper, picking and harvesting it, drying it and getting tit to the market was all Bappukanaran's job.

This year there was a bumper crop of berries, workers with ladders and three-cornered baskets had come from four different villages to pick the pepper. The pepper vines spread from Jack trees to the Ambya trees forming an impenetrable weave. The workers in their lightly fastened undergrid and knee length loin cloth braced themselves for the work ahead. As soon as the poor fellows were up on the trees, biting ants made a beeline through their red undergrids to their buttocks; seeing them grind their teeth in sheer helplessness Bappukanaran on the ground, shook with laughter.

The picking and cleaning and drying of the spice went on for days. And then one day early in the morning, they began to load Kunjaman's bullock cart with pepper sacks. When the cart was full, Kunjaman, jerking the ox's tail, shouted "Poo Hai" and the cart moved on.

Then Bappukanaran called from behind.

"I haven't climbed in, you son of a dog." Kunjaman pulled the reins, the bullocks topped, and Bappukannan got in.

There was hardly any light on the road so Kunjaman got out the cart to raise the wick of the lamp hanging from the belly of the cart. The red mud road was now clearly visible and the cart cut thorough the stone strewn path. In the light of the swaying lantern shadows waxed and waned to play hide and seek.

When they reached the top of the Machanari mound, Kunjaman got out of the cart.

What came next was the steep slope with a history of rushing many a wagon headlong over it.

Crouching under the cart Kunjaman tightened the brake that kept the wheels in place; then jumping back on to the cart he held on to the bullock's tail on both sides. The freight moved on with an 'omkara' sound; the constant friction of the metal wheel on the brake composing the special effect.

When they reached the watering hole near Puthenpura, they saw a topless woman standing with a sack on her head.

Kunjametta? ....she called stopping his wagon, Kunjaman sprang out of it, took her load and dumped it in his cart. It was a sack of dried coconuts. With no words between them Kunjaman's gaze hungrily fixed itself on the two moving shells on her bosom. The two of them disappeared behind the building, into the darkness.

Bappukanaran was flabbergasted.

After a few minutes Kunjuman came out followed by the young woman. Still clinging on to the darkness of the shadow, she said "Kunjametta, I still have time." Bappukanaran's scorn and indignation gushed out.

"Thoo, son of bitch!"

"Some fellows are born to eat out of just one dish" mused Kunjaman. With that the wagon moved on. In Kunjaman's house every night there was a fight.

During their quarrels he thoroughly beat up his wife. Now Kanaran knew the reasons for their fight, by the time he had figured out their secrets, the cart had reached Telicherry.

They unloaded the pepper sacks in front of Mamukeyi's store house. Bearing the sack on their shoulders, the ebony colored

laborers in their raiment carried the sacks to the warehouse.Bappukanaran sitting on a stool in front of Keyi's table scrutinized the weighing. Mammukeyi worked hard, adding, deducing and scratching, with one hand smuggled inside his voile banian.

Soon it was time for tea and masala vadai. The chillies in the vadai restored Kanaran's spirit. "Have a smoke" Keyi gave Kanaran a cigar, a genuine Burma cigar. When he was in Singapore, he used to smoke plenty of them. But after coming back, he had the pleasure of this puff only when he was with Keyi.

Revelling in the acrid taste of the chillies and the heady scent of the cigar Kanaran became oblivious of his surroundings.

"Hundred and twelve rupees" Keyi's voice startled Kanaran.

Keyi, pulling a silver handle, opened the drawer and gave him the money. A hundred rupee note, a ten rupee note and two silver coins. When he received the hundred rupee note with the emblem of the King's head, his heart fluttered like that of a man touching his bride. In the excitement he dropped the silver coin. When he stooped to get it, the coin rolled off and disappeared behind the sacks. "Leave it, I will give you another one," said Keyi. A new silver coin handed on his palm.

The cart driver Kunjaman was standing outside the warehouse.

"Come here!" Keyi called out to him Kunjaman came in showing his stained teeth in a smile. Mammu Keyi gave him a silver coin. Kunjaman smiled again. One full rupee.

If he were to work in the Badakara market till his bullocks foamed at the mouth, all he could make was a petty, eight anna.

But whenever he came to Keyi in Telicherry he was rewarded with a full rupee which flooded his heart with happiness.

When the sun began to set Kunjaman and Kanaran started their journey back with the empty cart. They wanted to reach Karakad by night-fall. Bappukanaran was comfortably dozing in the cart. When it suddenly stopped, jolting him violently, he asked "what happened?"

"The axel is broken" Kunjaman jumped off the cart. By then

one wheel had already fallen off the wagon to crash to a side. The bullocks lost their balance and fell to the ground with a cry. The iron bar connecting the wheels broke into two.

"Bagavathy!" Kanaran sighed, "God helped us. What if this were to happen when we were loaded with pepper! We have been saved by the grace of Valia Thangal" he assured himself.

Kunjaman untied the bullocks, led them to nearby banyan tree and left them with some fodder. "It can't be fixed without a blacksmith" he announced.

They started to walk towards Mannazhi, three miles away from where they were stranded. Once you left Telicherry Mayyazhi was the only place where you could find a blacksmith; when they reached there they saw his workshop was closed. Then they learnt that he had died in the last year's cholera epidemic.

They returned. What could they do now? To get a black smith they had to reach their village. There were no wagons coming, and in order to get the assistance of a blacksmith they would have to reach Karakad. So they decided to walk home with the bullocks.

Piling up the cart and the wheels by the side of the road, they asked a man living close by to keep an eye on their things and started their journey back. By then night was falling and they had a five or six hours walk ahead of them.

It was a Friday night, the night of the spirits and ghosts. Moonlight was filtering through the people and banyan trees like mist. Kunjaman and Kanaran where hot and thirsty. Their legs ached, still they walked. The bullocks pulled along too. They were panting and frothing at the mouth. Both man and beast trudged along, the dust turning their legs into a coppery hue.

When they reached Kunjipally grounds they stopped as far as they were concerned a journey through those grounds at night was sheer nightmare. On the one side of the road was the mosque and burial grounds and on the other a sprawling woodland with lots of trees that hid thieves and secrets in them.

Once a year Kunjipally celebrated a feast. On that day there would be thriving fair there. Kanaran didn't realize that today was the feast day. They decided to have a cup of tea. Kunjaman tied the

bullocks to a tree, gave them some grass and then they walked into a tea shop that was fairly empty. They washed their face and sat on a bench.

In a second, a glass full of tea appeared in front of them. Seeing the cannisters full of 'kaodi' Kunjaman's mouth began to water. He ordered a plate of those when they finished eating and drinking they felt dog tired.

"Can we sleep ;here, for a while?" asked Bappukanaran. "Why not?" replied the shopman. "Then please keep this cash for me. I will take it back when we leave" Saying this Kanaran handed the money bag to the shop keeper. The bag with hundred and twelve rupees in it. Then they stretched themselves on the long benches. Neither could remember when they slipped into sleep.

When Bappuakanaran woke up he was shivering like a leaf. There were no shops, market or any crowd around. Only a long stretch of fields graveyard, mosque and the forest. The two of them were sleeping on the sand and the bullocks were munching under a tree. For a long time he couldn't utter a word.

Then he shook Kunjaman by the shoulders.

"Dai Kunjaman. Get up, you son of a bitch."

Kunjaman woke up and yawned. As he opened his mouth he had a little inkling of where he was. His eyes grew wide and them the iron of reality thrust itself into him. The stunned Kunjaman could not shut his mouth.

Bappukanaran came to his senses and managed to figure out most of what had happened. Some inscrutable events had taken place. It must be the work of the devils and other evil spirits he thought. But that was not the problem. The problem was that due to their powerful magic, Kunjaman could not close his mouth. In this pathetic state with his mouth open and eyes blinking Kunjaman started a slow dance of Kathakali. He couldn't utter a word, but his eyes glistened with tears and his limbs moved.

Kanaran tried every trick in the book but he couldn't manage to close the other man's mouth. Finally Kanaran ran all the way home with the bare backed bullocks and an open mouthed Kunjaman.

Running and running they reached the Arakkal home. Kanaran

narrated the whole incident to Thangal in a voice full of wonder. Thangal was seated in the front of the house, on his big chair smoking a cigar.

Thangal didn't seem at all stunned. He threw the butt of the Singapore cigar away, thought for a while and then glared at Kunjaman who stood with his mouth wide open. After a second he charged at Kunjaman, hissing like a snake. The terror-struck Kunjaman screamed.

"Hooyee'

Thangal laughed and said "Don't worry". He looked at the puzzled Kanaran and explained "These are the games that Jinnis play!"

A disheartened Kanaran walked back to the veranda and sat down leaning on the pillar. Hundred and twelve rupees gone down the drain! He could not get that thought out of his mind. Thangal got up from his chair. Patting him on the shoulder he reassured him.

"Don't you worry. We will get that money back. Next year this time if you go back to Kunjipally you will see the same fair, the same shop and shopkeeper. Then you go to him and say "Give back the money, I gave to you yesterday for safe keeping. We are ready to go now".

When Kanaran continued to be unenlightened Thangal said "A day in a devil's life is a year for us, man".

11

Neeli was in labour. The last nine months while she carried her baby with a heart laden with sorrow, Bappukanaran's wife Pokki, was her only solace.

Pokki looked after her like a mother. When Neeli was worn out with vomiting in her third month, Pokki massaged her back. In the fourth month, when she had cramps Pokki sought the help of the Vaidyar. In the sixth month, Neeli became anemic and Pokki got

her special medicines mixed in honey to drink. In the seventh she prepared Okra kashayam to relieve her pain.

So far Neeli was spared any experience of acute pain. Pokki who had never borne a child nursed Neeli as if she were an expert on the aiments of pregnancy and child birth, as if she knew the pangs of pain. Besides Neeli was specially grateful to Pokki for not having ever said a word against the child's father. She never tried to pry into the identity of the molester.

Now that Neeli was in labour, her contractions started. 'Oh my God!' with the moan she began her slow, torturous climb to the pinnacle of pain. It started with a sharp stab under the spine. Then it rose in a wave rushing like a tornado into her abdomen. The piercing pain seemed to drag the whole of her womb out and bore it through every muscle in her thighs. After that the cycle of pain came to lull. It ceased for a minute or two only to start all over again.

Neeli imagined the baby to be something made of iron and steel instead of flesh and blood. She longed to pull it out and trample it under her feet. The pain seemed to hold Neeli in a vicious grip, Pokki sat close to Neeli watching her suffer under the throes of child birth lips turned black, cheeks blue, beads of perspiration on her forehead and her eyes half-closed. When Neeli groaned again, Pokki began to coach her.

"Don't just cry out like that, hold your breath, push hard and let out."

Neeli listened carefully then drawing all her strength into the lower part of her stomach she gritted her teeth and called out "Arakkal Bagavadi, Amma....."

The same time as Neeli started to have pains Attabi next door, began to go into labour. Actually her husband suffered more than her... his tormenting thoughts centered around the womb who perished in child birth.

"Dai Andraman", hearing Thangal's choked voice Andraman came running. "Get on that horse, go to barrister Kunji Raman's house and give this letter to him". At first Andraman took his master's instructions to be a joke for he had never mounted the horse before. Feeding and grooming the animal was his job, climbing him and taking him for ride was left to Thangal. "Go fast.... you

devil!" When Thangal urged him a second time, Andraman hooked his swollen feet into the stirrups and climbed on the horse. The horse sped like the wind.

In his house, Pookoya Thangal's friend, the lawyer Kunji Raman was sitting under the portrait of George the Sixth, reading some land deeds and old silver fish came out of the bundle in front of him. When Andraman cleared his throat Kunji Raman looked up. The lawyer had a double chin, a handlebar mustache and big red eyes. The look on his face terrified Andraman. He moved side and the lawyer went back to his reading. Precious time was being wasted. Andraman coughed and cleared his throat again. The lawyer looked up from his paper. A frightened Andraman hid, behind the curtain and the lawyer went back to his reading. Finally a flustered Andraman gathered courage from every corner and said.

" I am here"

"Who the hell?", a metallic sound boomed out of Kunji Raman.

"Me"

"Come in"

Trembling with fear, Andraman handed the letter over to the lawyer. Moving his head this way and that Kunji·Raman read the letter, put it in his pocket and asked,

"What do you do at Thangal's?"

"I am his horse-man"

"What are you afraid of?"

"Your mustache"

Suppressing his laughter the lawyer asked, "Where are you from?"

"Singapore"

"Alright, you may go now and tell Thangal, that I am sending the doctor"

Andraman climbed on the horse and started his journey back. Concerned, helpless and perspiring, Thangal paced up and down the house. Finally after hours of wait with a deafening sound of a

post man's bell, lawyer Kunji Raman's carriage came into the porch.

Dr.Alamelu came down the carriage.

She was a swirl of sensation with her gold complexion, lovely eyes and scarlet lips. As the buxom lady with the chiseled navel moved with a swing in her walk, the Ayah followed her with a leather bag in hand. Her black bag was filled with lifesaving medicines.

Dr.Alamelu blessed him with a glance, and Thangal pleaded:

"Save me, please"

Alamelu went straight into the room. The ayah followed. When the door closed behind them Thangal grew more agitated and the cries from the room became louder. Both in the kitchen and the corridors people moved around as in a silent movie.

The ayah stuck her head and hands out asking for some hot water. "It should be strained" she said. Then the door closed again. Thangal couldn't hear much of anything, from the room occasionally he heard the clinging sound of metal instruments. Finally when even that had stopped Thangal began to pace the floor. But his body and mind were drained of all energy.

"Baby girl"

The crashing announcement made Thangal look up. The Ayah stood filling the door way, her black dark face content and bright with happiness. Then the doctor came out, her damp clothes clinging to her body. She looked at Thangal.

"Your wife and child are safe" she said.

Thangal was deliriously happy but he didn't know what to do. So he just said,

"Come, we'll go up and rest"

Alamelu sat on the velvet covered bed in Thangal's guest room. He had two glasses of grape juice ready, mixed with honey and sugar garnished with slivers of almond. When he gave her the drink, Alamelu noticed his hairy arms.

Thangal was full of happiness. At that moment he couldn't think

of Alamelu or her impotent husband. All he could think of was his own perpetuity, his growing family. His daughter who would grow up to give birth to a whole lot of children to sustain his noble family heritage.

"Shall we go down?" Thangal asked Alamelu; she was all eyes for him. As she gazed at him with intense passion, she began to feel faint like a patient. When her face turned pale and her legs trembled Thangal reached for her. Soon two pairs of ankles and legs were tangled on the ochre colored floor.

After a while Alamelu said "Enough, this is more than enough, but I have a request, I want to come here again."

"That is no problem" is what he said. Down below a big crow had gathered around the gate to see the lady "SARDAR". It was the first time a doctor had ever set foot in their village. So far Komappa Vaidyar was the only physician they had known. Now they thronged to see the lady doctor, a beautiful one at that. Just then Bappukanaran's wife, Pokki stormed through the gate and Buhari's security, panting like a beast of burden. Words seemed to get struck in her throat.

"What do you want?" Thangal who was accompanying Alamelu asked her. "Neeli . ..."

"What's wrong?"

"She is in a bad way"

"Did she have the baby?"

"Yes" she said trying to steady herself. "But she is bleeding terribly"

"Is that so? Can you spare ten minutes?" he asked Alamelu.

"Of course", she agreed readily, her lips still moist with the luscious honey of their encounter.

They walked past the mosque, its ground and the railway station to reach Bappu Kanaran's house. The small house under thatched roof reminded one of the novel with a tragic end. Alamelu stepped into its dark interior. The stench of blood was everywhere. Neeli like a corpse was lying on a mat on the floor in one of the rooms in the south en.

The baby all blue was between her legs. It was still bleeding from its wound where the chord was cut. The mat was covered in blood and the after birth spread like a dark cloud in it. Blazing with anger Alamelu asked "Why haven't you removed all this?"

"The washer woman hasn't come yet" Pokki informed with great deference.

"Why is that?"

"She is gone to her sister's house for a party"

"Who cut this umbilical cord?"

"Me" Pokki said apologetically

"What did you cut it with?"

"With a sickle"

"With a sickle!" repeated Alamelu, incredulous and trembling in anger. Pokki tried to explain further.

"It was not the field sickle but the one I use to cut fish"

Noticing Alamelu's rage, Pokki said no more. Alamelu was burning with anger. The patient was on the floor, she had to kneel in front of patients many times before this . As she bent beside this one, anger seemed to seep into her.

Alamelu knelt beside the pool of blood. Flashing her torch she examined the patient. Her face was as white as paper and her eyes looked like that of a dead fish. Seeing no beads of perspiration the Doctor's gloved hands moved into her blood clotted vagina. The cause of death revealed itself on the tip of her fingers. She washed her hand in a basin and looked at the infant.

"Did you bathe the baby?"

'No'

"Then you better clean it. At least let one life be saved"

No one cried for Neeli, none could shed a tear for her. Without ever revealing the name of the man responsible for her pregnancy, keeping it like a big secret from the face of the earth, Neeli ha d closed her eyes for ever. End of the story, Neeli became history but the story of her sone didn't end there. It is a story yet to be written.

A topic of interest for researchers and Historians to come.

There was no one to nurture the baby. Neeli who had milk to give him slept under the cashewnut tree in a corner of Bappukanaran's garden with the earth on her bosom.

Whenever the baby cried Kanaran's wife pokki moistened his lips with cold water. It was a problem. Pokki had no clue to the bringing up of a baby and Kanaran was equally ignorant of the task.

As the four or five people left in the house sat on the benches with their faces in their hands Thangal came by.

"Is the baby alive?" he asked; the sudden question startled everyone. They sprang up, no one answered. "Who is feeding it?" he asked again. No one spoke. The baby lying on a rag inside the house cried aloud 'la'

"Why don't you speak?"

"There is no woman around with a new baby"

"Have all the breasts in this village dried up?" He asked.

The baby cried again "La!". "Can you hear him?" He is calling Allah. His father is a Mulsim. Take him" said Thangal. People could not comprehend him.

"I am asking you to carry him and come with me"

Carrying the baby wrapped up in some clothes, Pokki went past Neeli's new grave, following Thangal. When Thangal got into his house, Pokki turned to go through the back door. Thangal stopped her "Come in this way. He is ours" he said.

For the first time in her life Pokki walked through the front entrance of the great house with the baby in her arms. She passed under the canopy of chandeliers to the room where the Bibi was sleeping. She put him down on the mat spread next to the Bibi's bed.

"Now you may go" said Thangal to Pokki. Then he went out to get some one to call Eramullan. When Eramullan came in a hurry, Thangal said "Call out the prayer. There is one more baby here".

"Allahu Akbar.........."

Standing under the chandeliers with his fingers thrust into his ears, Eramullan prayed aloud.

Thangal went back into the room, picked up the baby in his arms and kissed him on the cheeks. Then seeing honey in the plate, kept next to his wife's bed, he took it, he removed his gold ring from his finger rubbed it in the honey and dabbed it on Neeli's baby's tongue. Part of the same honey which was given to his own darling daughter.

Laying the baby next to his wife he said you feed him. Just imagine you had twins".

Looking at her own baby sleeping next to her like a moon beam, the Bibi hesitated. "Feed him", ordered Thangal with fire in his eyes. The wife relented. Half heartedly she took the baby in her arms.

"I haven't fed my baby yet"

"Let him drink first'" he said. The baby began to suck the yellowish new milk. Thangal's eyes grew moist with tears.

"Do you know his name?" He asked. Turning on her back the Bibi opened her eyes wide

'Kunjali.' announced Thangal.

12

Everyone knew, that apart from the few hours he had spent with Pathu on their wedding night. Andraman had never slept any where except in his own quarters.

He could never fall asleep in any other place. Tonight when he was lying in the stable listening to the music of the horse's hooves and breathing in the warmth of the horses' dung he heard a baby cry. It was Kunjali. Pathu had come out into the night with Kunjali. The childless Pathu was hugging the baby to her bosom.

There was a faint glow in the sky. Andraman looked up. He could see the circle of a sky through his pipe-like window. The big four cornered main building, the stable the store house and the smoke house together seemed to choke him.

Andraman came out of his room; he took the baby in his arms Kunjali was six months old now. When he turned six months old, Bibi stopped feeding him; boiled and cooled goat's milk with an equal amount of water and cane sugar was his food now. He grew up in the pantry, feeling the warmth of Pathu's belly. Andraman and Pathu nourished him with food and love and he smiled at them with his toothless gums.

Kunjali's breast-feeding had come to an abrupt end. One day all on a sudden, like a peal of thunder the Bibi announced.

"I shall not breast-feed two babies."

Thangal took note of her words and deeds, he could see her point. Having to feed two babies the Bibi was growing weaker day by day. The circles under her eyes had grown darker, her face had become paler and her body thin. Neither magic nor medicine seemed to be able to restore her strength, so finally Thangal said,

"You can stop feeding Kunjali."

Did she really grow thin from having to feed two babies? Parting with the precious milk meant for her darling and giving it to a whore's child was heart-rending to her. Cursing her fate, she cried every night, alone in her misery. Breast - feeding a bastard was a matter of shame for her; the great sorrow of her life.

He was a child born to a nobody, a bastard. To have to feed that bastard under duress! How could a wise man like her Thangal take such a decision?

This was the great puzzle in her life. Why did her husband, the man who could discern right from wrong, the one who prayed five times a day, the one with the mark of prayer on his forehead, the son of powerful miracle maker, how could he get caught in this web? Does everyone weave a net for himself to be trapped in? No.........No........tears flowed down her cheeks. She hated the little devil, Kunjali, who drained her breast of the milk meant for her darling daughter.

But he was a lovely child with blue eyes, brown hair and big ears. Some big shot's son. It was an unsolved mystery. Pathu was the one, who got most upset about all this. Many a night she cried for Kunjali, she was sad that she had no milk to feed this baby. To

her this was the greatest tragedy of her life. Yet at times, when she slept hugging him close to her, she sneakily stuffed her purple nipples into his mouth. Kunjali would hungrily suck at it a few times and then cry aloud. Then Pathu would gather him in her arms and come out into the night. This is what had happened on this night as well.

The stout Andraman took the baby from her and kissed him. The touch of the smooth Mongolian face didn't irritate the child. He walked up and down the garden with Kunjali in his hand. The moon of the fourteenth night cooled the earth. Kunjali, looking at the moon in the sky beckoned it.

Suddenly the front door groaned. Pathu panting with fear ran towards the back with Kunjali in her arms. It was Thangal who came out through the opened door.

Thangal's little daughter was screaming her head off. For the last one hour the baby had been crying in her room. Feeding her, crooning to her, patting her on the back, tying an amulet, even a generous supply of the soothing medicine didn't seem to ease her discomfort. In spite of all the prayers the child continued to cry.

Thangal pulled out an easy chair and sat on it with the baby on his lap. Opening her eyes wide the baby looked at the sky and squirmed and screamed. Every was up from their sleep. Snuffing out his beedi, Buhari reached the scene first, then came silhouettes from different directions, spreading like shadows in the moon light. When they stood still, Thangal's voice boomed,

"Call Bappukanaran!"

Bappukanaran was already there. Some one had earlier taken care of that detail.

"I am here"

Kanaran announced. His voice thick with sleep.

"Kanaran, we have to get Komappa Vaidyar here immediately"

In the middle of the moonlight night men walked to Chombal beach in search of Komappa Vaidyar when they reached him in the house he was fast asleep. But within half an hour he was in Arakkal Tharavad. The sound of foot steps at the gate and the sound of the

palm umbrella grating against the wall comforted Thangal.

The half-naked Vaidyar sat on the chair infornt of Thangal. He examined the baby from tip to toe, with his eyes and his hands. The baby was still crying; its face was puffed up and blue, every vein in her body stood stained. With her hands waving in the air and her face turned to the sky, the child screamed on. The Vaidyar massaged her stomach, patted her chest and checked her pulse with great difficulty. When he finished examining her Thangal asked for the prescription leaf. Tightening his dhoti the Vaidyar said.

"No need for any prescription. Get me a mirror."

"A mirror!" repeated Thangal, in wonder.

"Yes, A mirror."

"What for?" Thangal asked with growing suspicion.

"Bring one and I'll show you," assured the Vaidyar.

A small mirror brought from Singapore hung on the wall in the portico; Kanaran pulled it out. Komappa Vaidyar lifted the baby from Thangal's lap and sat her in his own. Next he caught the sky in the mirror and gave it to her. When the baby looked she saw the full moon shining in the mirror. When she shook the mirror, the moon trembled and when she moved it, the moon moved too. With that the baby stopped crying. She had conquered the moon. Spitting out his pan the Vaidyar said.

"Let me take my leave."

13

With a dab of honey and gold on his newborn baby's lips Pookoya Thangal named her Pookunjibi. The four years that followed went very fast. Crawling and crying, standing up and falling Thangal's only child grew up. Hugging Pookunjibi to her bosom and stroking her bottom, her mother Attabi, said.

'Bi baby, go to sleep'

"Tell me a story"

"What story?"

"The story of the Jinn"

Everynight before she went to sleep, Pokunji wanted to hear a story. So as usual Attabi began her story. "Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a princess. She was the daughter of a king. She was pretty and noble like you. The princess was also an only daughter like you. She was lovely and smart; she had silk dresses and exquisite, dainty, jewels. And she was the darling of one and all.

She was the apple of the King's eye, the life of the queen, who was no more, the pet of the palace and the sweet heart of the land.

When she was a little girl, she would sleep on her mummy's tummy, and the big princess would tell her stories till the little one fell sleep.

They were tales of Malaks, Ephireeths, devils, Uruhammes, Jinns, sheiks and mosques. Listening to these stories the princess slept, hearing these stories the princess grew. She grew into a lovely maiden, a tall blue-eyed beauty. Young lords from all over came to the palace for her hand. But she didn't like any of them. That made the Sultan, the princess's father, very said. One day the king called for her, sitting on his diamond studded throne, called out to his daughter, who stood before him on the carpet. "Daughter, darling!, I have found you a suitable prince. There is no one to beat him in intelligence, scholarship, courage or wealth; look at him, he is over there".

The princess's eye followed the king's hand. Her gaze lingered on the handsome prince for a moment. Than she put her head down. "What is your decision?"

"I do not want him"

The princess lifted her head; she saw the fire of anger burning in her father's eye. But it didn't frighten her. Then the king's voice rose like thunder. "Speak up, tell me fast. Who do you want from the face of this earth? Nothing is impossible for me."

With her head bent low the princess replied,

"I want a jinn"

After saying this the princess went straight to her room, locked the doors, and cried for a long time, all alone.

The prince of her father's choice was tall like a jinn, with broad shoulders and a wide chest full of hair. He stood stock still. The King, unrelenting, roared in anger.

"This prince is your man" so the young prince married princess. The whole country celebrated the event. The king distributed grain and gifts to all. He showered the entire land with rice. At night the prince entered the bridal chamber and waited for the princess. She came in shining like a moon. The prince staggered in the dazzling light of her beauty. It rendered him unconscious. He fell flat on the satin bedsheets. The princess slept on her bed, dreaming of her imaginary love. Later in the stillness of the night, when the sky was lit up with a thousand blooms, a knock at her window woke the princess up. She was astonished to see her dream come true. At the open window stood a jinn as tall as a coconut tree! The Jinn of her dreams! He beckoned her with his long, strong arms. Silently the princess got up; she looked at the sleeping prince for a minute and then opened the door to go out.

Outside the Jinn King waited for her. Next to him was a huge horse. Snatching the princess and holding her close to him the Jinn rode away on the horse.

When the prince woke up at dawn, he found that the princess was not in her bed. Thinking that she had gone out for a while he continued to rest. But when she didn't show up for a long time the prince walked out the door that was left open by princess.

"Where, where is my princess? My love?" cried the prince.

Hearing this the whole palace woke up. But she was nowhere around. All the soldiers and all the people went in search of the princess in all directions. They went into the neighboring villages and countries too. Finally a fisherman found the princess. She was on the beach on a bed of sand, in the solitude of the sea; sleeping like a mermaid.

Her eternal sleep......

By the time the story got to this point Pookunji was fast asleep. The next day she woke up crying for the princess murdered

mercilessly by the Jinn, mourning for the dead princess on the beach.

Hearing her cries everyone was up they asked "What happened my child? Did you get scared?"

Attabi rushed in to hug her, and Pookunji replied "No....nothing."

When she asked again Pookunji answered "My dream".

Kunjali who slept in the same house, never had any dreams. All he ever saw were nightmares. He never dreamt of a Jinn, or an Ephereth or Malak instead he saw people.

Every night he went to sleep next to Pathu on a hard bed within the four walls of the stuffy quarters next to the kitchen. The minute he put his head on the pillow the kitchen came alive, with the sounds of the maids, fighting and eating. Then came the sound of the scraping and washing of dishes and bottles. How could he sleep in the midst of all this clatter?

The stale smell of spoiled rice and soured fish curry assailed his nostrils driving his sleep away. Seeing the shapes of people in the dark, he would scream. Pathu would complain.

"Why don't you sleep, you wretch?"

In the shifting heat of that dingy place, Pathu would press his face to her naked body and order.

"Sleep"

"I am scared"

"Then you drink this"

With that Pathu would push her nipples into Kunjali's mouth.

Sucking them hard he would try to sleep. Floating on a feeling of contentment, Pathu would slowly sink into a pool of sleep, while Kunjali stayed wide awake with a dry mouth.

Then he would hear the song of Eramullan from the mosque. Songs of war and love and other heroic deeds from far, far away. Listening to them he would doze off. At dawn Eramullan's call for prayer, would wake him up with a jolt.

Thus walking up and going to bed to the sound of Eramullan,

Kunjali began his life in Arakkal house.

Only one person was unhappy about his growth - Attabi. She waited, hoping and wishing for the day of his banishment from there. But it was in vain for his roots began to so deep into the house, that neither man nor ephereeth could uproot him from there.

Everynight Attabi seemed irritable. She cursed Kunjali for anything and everything that went wrong in the house. If a chicken stopped laying eggs, if a kitten fell into the well, if some one slipped on a banana peel or if the cow fell sick, immediately Attabi said,

"Ever since that devil put his foot in our house, things have been going down hill!"

Thus, witnessing minor mishaps and listening to fierce curses, Kunjali grew up in the house, like a weed in drought.

14

The Muslim school was only a stone's throw away from the Arakkal house. One day, four hours after the morning prayer Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal was seen walking to the school holding his daughter's hand. His foster son was trailing behind him.

From a distance the school with a thatched roof, that stood next to the mud road that divided the Masjid grounds into two, appeared to be like a chicken coop. When he reached the school he could hear a roaring sound coming from within. The muslim children in their special costume and shaven heads were busy reading the engraved wooden plank and the Koran.

Thangal's entry into the school was totally unexpected. Seeing him the children stood up and the school fell silent, Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal's arrival startled the Musaliar as well as the other teachers. It was Moosa Musaliar, the manager cum teacher of the school who mustered enough courage to speak first. He said.

"Are! What is this? It you had informed us about your coming........" Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal sat on the headmaster's chair. The single-handed chair groaned under his weight. It's seat was sagging and the sides bursting. He said.

"Why should I inform you? Isn't this a school? If I were to visit your house then I should let you know about."

The fair Moosa Mussaliar turned a shade paler.

"I want to enroll the children in the school. That's why I am here."

"No problem in that" said the head master, Shankara Kurup. Shankara Kurup was the some of the village Adhikari. The man had passed his fifth grade-the smart one. Kuru was neatly dressed in his voile jubba, mundu and white under clothes. Apart from the one dirty habit of spitting loudly through the narrow window, he was quite clean.

Looking all around the building, Thangal asked.

"What's this? You have only one room!"

"True, there is only one room. But it is a big one." explained the manager. Taking off the white cap from his head, he wiped the sweat off his bald head.

"How many classes do you have there?"

"Five classes"

"In here? How do you manage that?"

"The classes are divided with the help of benches."

"On yes. Wood is rather cheap, isn't it?". Thangal paused a while, and continued.

"I want to admit the children in this school. Even if they don't learn the scriptures thoroughly, they should learn to write well."

The remark turned the Mussaliar white, and the head master Shankara Kurup red.

"That's good" said he with a happy red face.

"Do you teach any English here?" Thangal asked "No" said Kurup apologetically.

"Does anyone know English?"

Thangal was not about to give up.

"Just a little," said Shankara Kurup.

"Who is the one, who knows English?"

"I, myself."

"How much have you learned?"

"I can write all the twenty six letters in print and in writing".

Smiling Thangal asked.

"What is your name?"

"Shankara Kurup"

"What is your father?"

Shankara Kurup thought for a while, he is asking about my father. Then without any hesitation, he said,

"Adhikari"

"Ha......Ha.....Ha" Thangal burst into a laugh. That startled Shankara Kurup. He thought something had gone wrong. "That is beyond me" he explained, bowing his head. It was Thangal's turn to his head. After all Shankara Kurup was only a fifth grader. But he was the son of the village head. The Adhikari had only two sons. The eldest one was studying for a degree, in Madras because of that Shankara Kurup the second son couldn't afford to study, beyond the fifth grade. All the money was being sent to Madras for the other one.

"Now then you can start immediately" said Thangal. Two smooth wooden planks were brought to the room. They were going to fill it with letters for Pookunji and Kunjali to learn their Arabic.

"Good smooth planks" Moosa Mussaliar dipped his pen into the ink and wrote the letter on the plank and then called the children to him. When he took Pookunji's hand, first Thangal said, "Give it to the boy first."

"With a guilty look on his face the Mussaliar called Kunjali and gave him his slate with the Arabic letters on it. Kunjali received it with both his hands.

"Smart kid". With this comment Mussaliar started to teach him. He pointed to the first letter and said.

"Alif"

Pointing to the letter with his index finger, Kunjali repeated loud and clear.

"Alif"

That surprised the Mussaliar. When Thangal said,

"What good pronunciation." No one figured out what that was. Feeling rather small in front of Thangal's vast knowledge of English, they just bowed their head; when he finished teaching the girl also, Thangal gave Mussaliar two rupees as dakshina. The man was dumb-struck. The usual gift was a mere four annas and this was eight times that!

Shankara Kurup came with the class register under his arm. The edges of the book looked wet with his sweat. He opened it and asked.

"Shall I enter the names?"

"Sure, Isn't that why the children have come here?" Lifting the red turkey cap from his head, Thangal said,

"Arakkal Kunjali and Arakkal Pookunjibi"

Shankara Kurup wrote the names in the book with a flourish and Thangal gave all the three teachers a dakshina of two rupees each. After that he got them tea and sweets from Kannan's restaurant. Then he said goodbye to them and climbed down the steps. The crowd waiting outside the school began to move with him. Suddenly he heard a whimper. Turning back he saw Pookunji standing, with fear in her eyes, sweat on her face and traces of mucous under her nose. She was crying. He head was bare, the veil had slipped off. As she ran to her father, the air around her was filled with the lovely fragrance of her hair oil. The teacher and the Head Master were right behind her.

"She is a little scared. This is quite common." Said Shankara Kurup.

"Then let her come tomorrow" said Thangal holding on to her hand.

But Kunjali didn't budge an inch; that Muslim school was the starting point of his life's lessons and struggles. He was going to spend the next five years of his life in that school - learning to write

and to read and do the scriptures.

He looked up- above him over the shafts, the roof was a mat of thatched palm leaves full of holes. Bamboo poles thrust out of these holes into the sunshine. Drops of sunshine, the shape of eggs, entered the room through the roof. Amina put a red manchadi seed on the flat egg shape on the floor, asking him .

"Do you want to see the seed walking?"

Kunjali didn't reply but in a few minutes he saw the manchadi moving inch by inch in the sun.

He looked at the walls around him. There were a lot of pictures hanging on those white washed walls. In between them he could see red vertical lines. Designs made by last year's monsoon-the art of rain dripping through the ant hills....startled by a sudden noise Kunjali turned to Moosa Mussaliar. He was banging on the table with his huge hands and shouting.

"Go out and pee, you goons". The class became silent. Children closed their books. Lifting the Koran and the slate towards them, they kissed it and then piled it all on the cot in the corner. One by one the children marched towards the pond in the mosque ground and the girls trailed to the toilet in the neighboring house.

The boys who went to the mosque pond peed behind the trees and other such places and then came there to wash. Kunjali felt thirsty. Seeing Eramullan drawing water from the well he went to him and asked.

"Will you give me some water"

"What for?"

"To drink. I'm thirsty."

Eramullan got the shock of his life; so far no one had ever asked for the water from that well to drink. Who would to drink that greasy water with the smell of death in it?

The bucket slipped away from his hand landed at the bottom with a thud and then came up.

"Son, you shouldn't drink this water. It is full of oil from dead bodies." The school children explained the rest of the story to him. After that Kunjali could think of nothing but the oily water till he

reached home. As soon as he reached the house, he went in search of Pookunjibi. He found her sitting under the tamarind tree. He sat close to her and said.

"Pookunji you should never drink the water from the Masjid well even if you are thirsty"

"Um?" asked Pookunji waking from a dream of her own.

"That water is full of oil from the dead bodies"

Pookunji was horrified, trembling she ran away, leaving him under the tree. The mere mention of a corpse sent shivers down her spine. Oil seeping out of corpses. "O my god" she cried aloud. That night she couldn't sleep at all. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Moosa Musaliar's eyes, moving like trapped cockroaches in a soda bottle. When she dozed she could feel the smell of death wafting from the far away well.

15

The annual monsoon arrived early in the morning, quite unexpectedly. It started with a deafening thunder that shook the corners of the world. Eramullan thought that the entire mosque had crumbled to the ground. The steamy summer heat in the mosque had worn him out. All he could remember was the sweat flowing from his shaven head to the mat on the floor. Then came the sound of the mosque crashing down. Eramullan got up, rubbing his eyes. It was dark all around him. The lamp had gone out and the mosque was in darkness. Spreading his hands out in front of him, he slowly walked around the place - no, nothing had been broken. Outside the thunder and lighting continued unrelentingly; then for a moment, the entire building was lit up by a flash of lightning.

After that, abruptly, the rain came tumbling down. The wind carried the fresh smell of wet earth through the night. The huge tree in the mosque ground stood swaying in the wind, it's green leaves flew hither and thither racing with the rain.

Eramullan was pleased. At least the rain was here. Groping in the dark he managed to get hold of a matchbox. After striking a few sticks, one stayed long enough to light the lamp. Looking at the

Singapore clock he realized it was already six o' clock. He panicked. There was no water in the tank. The sultry heat of the previous night had put him to sleep early. Generally he would go to bed only after filling the tank. This was the very first time he had neglected his duty. He walked fast to the well. Folding his mundu and tucking it in, he began to pull at the winch. But no one heard the groan of the winch on that day. The sound of rain drowned it. Nevertheless by the time the tank was filled Eramullan was wet with sweat, his thin body glistened in the rain.

After the 'wazu' Eramullan went inside the mosque and stood close to the 'Kamara' from where the Khaliar led the congregation in prayer. Turning west he put his fingers into his ears and cried with all his might.

"Allahu .....Akber..Allahu". Hearing his call the muslims were supposed to wake up and come to the mosque. Eramullan's voice was rumoured to reach a radius of ten miles. But that day, he wasn't very pleased with his call for prayer. He cleared his throat, spat out and then made a little sound. Something was amiss. His voice sounded weak and frayed. No one showed up for Sabahi. All the true believers who promptly come for prayers must have over slept in the cooling new rain. Or was it his voice? Eramullan was in an agony of suspense. Whatever the cause even the Khaliar didn't reach the mosque on that rainy morning so Eramullan prayed alone. In the mosque where usually more than a hundred believers prayed together, Eramullan like a lone mosquito, bent his knee before God.

Even after the sun was up, the rain kept falling. Sitting at his shutterless window Eramullan looked at the road. The Theeya workers were already out on their way to work in loin cloth and arecanut hats. After a while the rain stopped. Eramullan came out wearing his black rubber slippers. Kannan the nine and a half's tea stall was only a furlong away. The school and the panchayat office were next to his shop. All these buildings stood hugging the red mud path that led to the railway station.

When Eramullan reached Kannan's tea shop it was still empty. Kannan's wife was pushing the 'puttu on to the banana leaf spread on the mora. Throwing out his beedi Eramullan ordered.

"Half tea".

"Water is yet to boil, please wait a while" said Kannan apologetically.

Eramullan nodded and continued to say his "Dasvia" when the copper coin at the bottom of the samovar began to sizzle, they brought a steaming cup of tea and fresh roll of Puttu to him. But Eramullan didn't feel hungry at all. See him eat half-heartedly Kannan asked.

"What's happened, Mukri?"

The enquiry made him angry.

"My liver is dried up. Reduced to half, what else" With that he was out of the shop in a huff. This was an expression he used, whenever he was annoyed with Kannan. On his left hand Kannan had only half an index finger. It was the result of a small accident in his childhood. Long ago when he was very small, he used to work with a Vaidyar. One unlucky day when he was chopping medicine leaves, half of his finger got clipped and mashed up with the medicine. From then on he came to be known as Kannan, the nine and a half.

The children from the masjid were spilling out into the road clutching on to their scripture planks. Dressed in silk veils and kerchiefs the children kept shouting They were oblivious of their clothes getting dirty in the new rain and their running noses. Seeing Eramullan on the road they crowded around him.

"Eramullanikka, sing a 'kess' sọng for us, please" they pleaded. Eramullan was very good at singing folk - songs. The children loved to hear him sing and clap to the rhythm of the song. But today he didn't sing. Without saying a word to anyone he walked straight towards the mosque. Once he was there, he washed his feet and sat inside.

The mosque lay to the south of the road, the scanty nochil grounds to the north and the school sat right in the middle of this. At the sound of the scriptures being recited in unison, Eramullan looked up. Moosa Mussaliar must have reached the school by now he thought. Then he saw someone coming down the mosque lane. It was Andraman and the children. He was in charge of bringing Kunjali and Pookunji to school. Seeing Eramullan, Andraman called out.

"I am here"

"Get lost you brute" is what he wanted to shout. After all he had stolen the love of his life and married her. But Eramullan never showed any resentment to him. In fact he had a sneaky respect for being Kurasi Pathu's husband.

Suddenly he heard the clopping of hooves on the path. Thangal was back after his morning ride with his tired horse. The one way track in which they were coming led directly to the Arakkal house; so only people from the house used it. Seeing the horse Andraman came running from the masjid. Thangal got down from the horse and walked to the house. Andraman and the horse followed him.

Now the children burst out of the school like fire crackers. After two hours of scripture reading they usually practised writing - Malayalam letters. In between the sessions was a short interval of about fifteen minutes. The children were running everywhere, celebrating the fifteen minutes of their freedom. But two of them separated themselves from the crowd and walked towards the mosque.

"Eramullanikka........" Hearing them call, Eramullan got up. 'Incense sticks', they shouted, showing him something.

"You go and keep them" he said showing no interest at all. The children wanted to burn them at Valiya Thangal's Khaber as an offering for some favor - or perhaps to cure some disease or to get back a long lost husband or relative, something like that. Usually Eramullan was always helpful in these little tasks. But today he just sat there. When the children called him again, he got up with great reluctance and lit the seven sticks. Standing near the Khaber, with the sticks burning in his hand he said.

"Remember your prayer!" Unfolding their mundu the children moved their lips in prayer. Eramullan stuck each of the incense sticks around the tomb stone. Swirls of smoke, spread in the air. When the bell rang the children ran back to the school.

16

Master Shankara Kurup smiled at everyone, even if he didn't know them. When he laughed the black tooth powder stuck between his white teeth became visible. When he talked spittle sprinkled like rain on the listener. Kunjali was of the opinion that the children on the first bench should have an umbrella open when the master was teaching. He always sat on the front bench.

Usually Shankara Kurup reached the school by ten thirty. He always started the day with a question.

"Did every one sign?" After that he added his own name to the list. With that the day began, ensuring his salary of half a rupee for the day.

"Dey Kunjali....."

When he called for him, Kunjali kissed the 'Koran musab', closed it and ran to him.

"Go, get me tea and a cigarette". Before he could call him again Kunjali was in Kannan's stall. As mentioned earlier, nine and a half Kannan's tea shop was right behind the railway station. So the train passengers, the clerk and the peon from the panchyat office and the teachers from the school, all were his regular customers.

The service in the restaurant was customised. When Krishnan Nambiar from the panchyat office came, Kannan served him with a light tea and a big banana. If it was the peon, then the menu was plain tea and pounded rice. For Gopalakuruppu master it was three pieces of Puttu, chick -pea curry and a full tea. Kannan fed each of his customers depending on the size of their wallet and stomach. Seeing Kunjali, he made a good cup of tea with thick cream. He pulled out a Scissors cigarette, that is what Shankara Kurup needed.

After drinking his tea, Shankara Kurup wiped his smooth shaven face with a towel. Then he took a puff at the cigarette with all his might. When the aroma filled the class room, Kunjali opened his nostrils wide so as to get as much of the smoke as possible into him. So did the other kids and the non-smoking teachers. After the last

puff he threw away the butt and asked.

"What Moosa master, do we have only scripture reading today?"

Though he was a musaliar, Shankara Kurup always addressed him as a "moosa master". Musaliar looked at him beseechingly then he banged on the table and announced.

"Stop. Stop the recital, children, now you may sit down".

With that the air became quieter. The children closed their books, tidied up their things and sat in the class. Actually that brings Moosa Musliar's day to an end. Teaching the scriptures is his goal in life. But he is also a regular teacher in the school. The fellow had somehow managed to pass his fourth standard. So with the special permission of the then deputy inspector Shiva Shankar Iyer, the Musaliar was made a teacher in the school.

There were altogether only sixty four children in the school. But even that number would come down to a mere twenty or thirty on the days when the catch was good at the beach. On most days the head master had to tamper with the register to fill in the quorum. Today instead of the twentyone regular, there were only nine kids in Musaliar's class. But that didn't bother him much; he was busy scratching himself. His whole body was covered with scabies, this gave his body the appearance of moulting snake skin. He scaly skin became itchy when he perspired. In the absence of other noises, the sound of his scratching would hit the walls of the school.

The Musaliar banged on the table and shouted "Why are you blinking like owls? Take out your books and read; you son of a bitch!"

"What should we read, Musaliar?"

"The language book, idiot!"

The girls with veils on their head and the boys with their shaven head began to sing together.

"I would come closer to you mother dear..........." As they began to sing in earnest, there was another bang on the table and a shout.

"Stop the song of the kafirs, fellows"

Every time he yelled something the Musaliar banged the table. It was as if he was bawling with the strength gathered from the act of slamming the table.

The children stopped singing and the Mussaliar ordered,

"Every one go and take a leak. Those who need water, go and have a drink".

As usual the boys ran to the school yard and the girls headed for the neighbour's house to use their toilet. Moosa Musaliar continued to scratch. Scabies was turning him into a slave-the man who tried to make a slave of everyone. Lessons from every class, geography, nature studies, gardening and civics filtered through his ears. Appu master, Shankara Kurup and Janaki teacher were teaching in earnest.

Soon the children came back. "Did you wash well, dogs...?"

The children smiled in reply, showing their teeth full of cavities.

"Now shall we learn some science, Kunjali?"

"Yes, Musaliar."

"Name a substance that stretches when it is pulled and gets back to its original form when not pulled? Answer only when you are asked."

The children waited anxiously.

Moideen stood up. Flaring his nostrils, then putting his tongue out till it almost reached his nose, he said.

"Jack fruit gum."

"Idiot!" The teacher glared at him for a second and then called on Pathoooty. Pathooty's infected ear was draining. She stood up and said.

"Rubber"

"Good, Pathooty beat Moideen"

Pathooty wiped the pus dripping down her ear with the head dress.

"Is the earth round or flat?" Moving his round eyes all around the class Mussaliar continued.

"You, Kunji Pokkar who lives on the way to the store, answer.

Kunji Pokkar stood up.

"Flat"

"Right, but that is according to our faith. How is it in science?" he asked slyly looking at Shankara Kurup. Kunji Pokkar was confused. Isn't the earth same in faith and science?

"Flat in science also" he said.

The answer made the Musaliar really mad.

"You come here, bastard" Kunji Pokkar edged closer to the table. Seeing the expression on Musaliar's face the student's face turned pale. Musaliar pulled the silk scarf until Kunji Pokkar's shaven head shone in the light. Musaliar smacked it with a big iron key. Not content with that he drew a big circle on his head with a piece of chalk.

Just then the bell rang. Kunjali was banging hard on an iron rod discarded on the railway track with a hammer. Every one in the masjid did the work allotted to them routinely. Kunjali brought tea and cigarette for the master and rang the bell at noon, Musaliar taught the Koran and so on. After the bell, the school was quiet for a while. Then came the clamour of books and slates being

dumped and the children screaming and running out for their lunch. Appu Master and Shankara Kurup were the first to get out. Then came Janaki teacher through the window as she opened her umbrella and walked away with a swing in her steps. How come this woman never had a baby? He marveled.

Musaliar never went anywhere. In the morning before he left his house he stuffed himself with Kanji and curry. In the evening he walked a good four miles to the house. Only after reaching home did he have his food. By the times he crossed the rail, dale, hill and paddy fields, he was thoroughly, exhausted. Then after a wash, he would sit in front of a mound of boiled rice and polish it off with fish curry in coconut gravy, and some mango pickle. But that came much later in the evening.

Ordinarily he just sat on the old cane chair from morning till evening until the bell rang. In the middle of this, he made just one trip to the mosque to pray; so the inhabitants of the chair, the beg bugs, feasted uninterruptedly on his buttocks.

After lunch Kunjali was the first to come back. Every day it was

the same. When Kunji Pokkar also came in, Musaliar called out to them.

"Come here, fellows."

The children came closer to his chair Musaliar lifted his shirt all the way up to his neck at the back and pleaded.

"Scratch me, sons"

The children began to scratch with determination; they moved their sharp nails all over his back. After some time the children said. "It's bleeding, Musaliar."

Their nails were dirty with grime under it. As they continued to scratch, Musaliar's head drooped down in a happy deep sleep.

17

Adjacent to the mosque grounds stood the house of Arakkal. A long high stone wall divided the two compounds. One side of it was occupied by the living and the other by the dead. The wall prevailed as if in a big balancing act between life and death. The top of the wall was fortified with a lot of sharp glass pieces. During the rainy season the wall was green in colour. But the onset of summer brought in a lot of chinks in the wall that hosted a million insects in them. It is not that he wasn't rich enough to plaster the wall between the house and the grounds but Pookoya Thangal was adamant about leaving it in its original state. It was always dark in the mosque grounds. Day or night made no difference there. The thick growth of trees, shrubs and garbage made it a dreary spot. But in the house beyond the wall, the Tharvad was always aglow, both day and night.

The house and its grounds were as big as the mosque and its grounds. The gate house in the southern corner of the wall was Buhari's abode, Buhari was like a Gurkha. He slept all day and kept awake all night. And when he was awake, he always had a lamp burning in the room. Beyond the gate house there was a huge yard,

ensconsed in an orchard. Three sides of the garden were filled with trees from India and Arabia. While the Indian ones stood strong like hosts the Arabians grew splendid like guests.

The house itself was like a palace. A foyer that stretched like a beach. From one end to the other it was filled with chairs and sofas made of wood and cane. The foyer led to a huge hall the floor of which was covered with the softest carpet available, and magnificent lamps hung from its ceiling.

Sheer luxury of the place made one want to flourish a sword in hand like a sultan. To the right of the hall was a rosewood staircase. It stood dividing the lovely ceiling into two squares, like the back bone of the room. Beyond this wall there was an indistinct darkness, filled with number of rooms and corridors. They were occupied by Thangal's sisters and their children. This territory ended in another hall, a working area where Kuraisi Pathu and Kunjali dwelt. Further down was the famous kitchen. Behind the kitchen was the large backyard that ended at the solid granite wall. The backyard was filled with strutting ducks, clucking hens and their countless chicks. The aviary next to the wall was full of doves. The shit and stink of the birds at the end of the vast garden completed the picture of the house.

Actually it was in the kitchen that life truly bristled. Kuraisi Pathu shouted at a girl.

"What are you blinking for? Skin the chicken fast". Kuraisi Pathu was the head of all the domestic maids. There were more than seven of them under her direct leadership. She was the undisputed queen of the kitchen. Even Thangal and his wife obeyed her in her realm. A maid went down the stairs with a couple of chickens in one hand and a knife in the other. The birds were still bleeding from the neck. She started to pluck the feathers and clean them with all her might. Two others were pounding something hard in the kitchen. Another maid sat on the floor husking roasted moong dal. Some one was drawing water form the well. Gradually the kitchen was filled with the heat and smoke of cooking. The eyes of women tending the fire watered; their stomachs were flat with hunger. By nine o' clock the meal had to be ready, a minute later would mean disaster.

The front of the house was already filled with a lot of guests and the inside with relatives, nephews and nieces whose mothers were

long dead. The people in the front were entertaining Thangal with gossip and stories. Reclining in the comfort of his big chair, upholstered in velvet, Thangal laughed uproariously.

As his laughter reached the portals of the kitchen the maids grew more and more nervous. Finally everything was ready. Pathu the Pathiri maker had a mound of pathiri in front of her. The Kanji in the pot rolled in a boil, when it cooled, coconut milk was add to it. Plates and bowls were filled with chicken curry and roasted fish, vegetables and fish stew in coconut cream and ground green chillies were served.

The servants in the kitchen worked like the parts of a machine. They got up before the cock crowed and worked till midnight. In between they fed the people in the house and the guests three times a day. No one asked them if they had eaten. Most of them were Thangal's slaves. Their families lived in his land and he could pick any of them to be his house maid. Buhari's son Hydrose carried the food from the kitchen. With that, sounds in the front of the house ceased.

In the dim lights of the kitchen the servant girls sat down on the floor leaning on the wall. They were tired, their clothes dirty with soot and sweat.

Kuraisipathu was serving Attabi pathiri dripping with ghee, steamed drumstick leaves and broken rice porridge in coconut milk. This was Attabi's menu for the night. Pookunji sat facing Atta-bi. They drank the kanji with the same spoon. Pookunji's eyes were drooping with sleep and a little leaf got stuck on her lower lip.

When she went to the kitchen to wash her hands Pookunji saw Kunjali eating his pathiri, sitting in the work area. There was a single mat with two plates on it and a smoking kerosene lamp was burning next to him. This is how Kunjali ate everyday. He ate and slept in the same place. Seeing Pookunji, Kunjali stopped eating; they went together to the papaya tree to wash their hands. The kitchen garden was awash in moon light. The shadow of the papaya tree spread flat on the ground. The ducks and the hens were flapping their wings in sleep making gentle sound, as light as the feathers falling in a breeze. Holding their hands together Kunjali and Pookunji looked up at the sky. Pookunji asked "Kunjali, do you see the scar on the moon?"

"Yes"

"Do you know what it is?"

Kunjali looked again....a rabbit shaped shadow in the middle of the shining full moon. What could it be? Kunjali wondered. He said, "No, I don't know". The Pookunji said "That is the moon's sorrow. The pain in his heart. He is a very sad person." When she said that Kunjali held her hand tight.

Then they heard the tinkle of bangles behind them Atta-bi was washing her hands; all her actions were accompanied by a jingle. When she walked it was her anklets, when she talked it was her lips, when she moved her neck, it was the gold ringlets on her ears. Seeing her one got the impression, that perhaps she was born a jingle box.

Suddenly Attabi started to shout and sweat.

"What is this lass? Don't you want to sleep? Why are you holding this bum's hand? Don't you have anything better to hold on to?"

The sudden shower of anger surprised Pookunji. Attabi came down the steps, she glared at Kunjali in the dim light of the night; he saw the fire in her eyes and cringed in shame. Grabbing .her daughter's hand, she walked away in a huff, seething with anger.

Kunjali went to sleep in the kitchen hall every day alone. Kuraisei Pathu came in only after he was fast asleep but he couldn't sleep tonight.

He had a lot on his mind, he feared everyone in that house. If he had to cross a room he would ask himself whether it was all right to walk there? If he felt like playing in the front of the house he wondered whether Attabi would scold him. If he saw sweets in the kitchen he would hesitate to ask for one. He had a constant feeling of being chased by some stranger in the house.

Kuraisipathu came in making a lot of noise with her wooden slippers. She hung the lamp in her hand on the nail on the wall and asked,

"You haven't slept yet, Kunjali?"

Smiling Kunjali fluffed his dhoti and fastened it around him.

That gladdened her. The ants and other insects must have fallen on his mundu, she thought. Removing her top she threw it on the bed muttering.

"What a terrible heat"

Cuddling him to her sweaty self she asked again.

"Why don't you sleep, my son?"

"I was thinking of something"

"Who are you thinking about?"

"Pookunji"

Hearing his answer Kuraisipathu was alarmed; she didn't say anything for a long time. Soon Kunjali was deep in sleep.

Down in the stable the horse was stomping the ground. Andraman was singing a Malai song to the rhythm of the hooves. The melody of the fold-song had an alluring quality about it.

Slowly Kuraisipathu got up from her bed; when she came out she saw the stable bathed in moonlight. The light in the mosque was out. Eramullan must be asleep she thought. When she knocked at the stable door a frightened voice questioned.

"Who is it?"

"Me"

Hearing Pathu's voice, Andraman jumped up. As he opened the door for her, he asked,

"Where is your blouse"

She went into the room and laid herself on the bed. The horse next door, stomped louder.

18

The madrassa was in a whirl of activity preparing itself for the pending school inspection. Ramakrishna Iyer was the deputy inspector; he was also known as the fox. For he refused to eat from any school, without his favorite chicken curry.

Shankara Kurup was in a fluster; from the day he received the notice of inspection, he had an upset stomach. Every year during the inspection Kurup suffered from diarrhoea. The mere thought of the inspection made him want to visit the maiden. No one could keep an account of the amount of aristham he drank during this time. Generally Kommappa Vaidyar made sure to send him two bottles of Kungaristam to his house before the inspection.

"How come you are so worried? The maps are all ready, aren't they?" Appumaster retorted.

"Maps are not enough. How are we going to have enough students?"

"Well, when the sardines are plenty, every kid is at the beach. How can we raze the sea?"

"Don't waste your time talking nonsense, master. We should think of a way to get the kids in here on the day of the inspection"

"Visit every house"

"That's it. That is a good idea." Suddenly Shankara Kurup was a happy man.

That evening they went to every house on the beach and begged the women mending nets to send their children to school on the day of inspection. Some pretended not to hear it. Some others spat out into the yard and asked,

"What's the use of going to school, if they came to the beach they can atleast get fish".

Then another woman said "If the inspector wants to test them, let him come here". Hearing her every one laughed.

Walking endlessly Shankara Kurup's feet cracked, Buhari the guard from Arakkal house white washed the school. Apart from

sleeping all day, once in while he also white washed the walls. He equated the white-washing with the cleansing of one's soul.

Appu master and Shankara Kurup hung maps on the newly white washed walls. They were from other schools. Moosa Musaliar held on to the small bench as they climbed on them to hold them steady. When his arms ached he cursed "These blasted maps". The maps of British India, Africa, North and South America, Russia and Europe were spread on the wall. A big globe was placed on the table. The earth full of colours went round and round on its axis. Altogether the school looked as busy as a wedding house.

The inspection was on Thursday. Shankar Kurup who never went to bed on the previous night missed the Thursdays dawn. He bathed in the temple pond, smeared sandalwood paste on his forehead and prayed fervently to his favourite deity.

"Put some good sense into the inspector". Then he got dressed in a poplin shirt and wore a mulmul dhoti. On the day of the inspection, instead of the usual stiff starch he smelled of sandalwood. When he reached the school, there was not a single soul there. The sky was dark with clouds, so there was no way to know the time. The only wall clock in the vicinity was at the Arakkal house. So he called out.

"O, Eramullan".

Eramullan....who was drawing water, dropped it and came running in a hurry and asked "What happened?"

"Go and see the time"

Eramullan sighed and said,

"I thought some one had fallen in the well"

When he came back he announced,

"Time is now seven thirty"

Shankara Kurup sat with his head in his hand for a long time; after a while the sun came out of the clouds and stood shining in the east. Still it was only seven thirty. When there was work to be done Shankara Kurup was sure to be early. He looked around the school carefully.

He saw the neatly arranged benches all dusted and clean the white washed wall and the colorful maps on them.

There was also a poster of a crow drinking water. But the rotting table and chairs spoiled the beauty of this pristine picture. How fast the wood rotted! He took a rag and began to wipe the tables and chairs. All the table tops were dirty with lizard and roach shit. Once he finished cleaning the furniture he sat looking out the window. Suddenly Moosa Musaliar appeared on the scene. He was earlier than usual. Even though he had no teaching on that day, he had arrived early to school. Shankara Kurup felt a singing admiration for him. They ordered two cups of tea from the store; by the time they got it, Appumaster and Janaki teacher arrived. Then one by one the children began to come. Kurup master opened the drawer, pulled out the register and began to mark the attendance.

It was getting late; Appumaster and Janaki teacher were talking away. Moosa Musaliar started to scratch through his shirt. Every one seemed calm. Only Shankara Kurup was worried, there were not enough children in school. But no one seemed to worry about it. Let the grants be cut then we'll see how cool these cucumbers are going to be, thought Shankara Kurup to himself.

Time was flying, by now except in the fourth grade every other class had the required number of students. The fourth standard needed three more students. Soon two more arrived, still one to go. Shankara Kurup's heart was going bong-bong over it, when the deputy Inspector's head appeared on the station road.

"Ha, there he is", boomed Shankara Kurup. For a few minutes blood seemed to completely drain out of his face. Everyone was petrified. Janaki teacher was in a quiver. The school fell silent and the children's sighs were thick enough to bounce off the walls.

Kunjali looked out of the window. The inspector's entourage had already left the main road and entered the path to the school. It looked like a train to him. Ramakrishna Iyer was fat and dark. Furthermore he had a black coat on. He had to enter side ways at the door. When he was in, the entire school stood up.

"Sit down". The man sounded like an empty tin can.

He walked into the first standard. Appu Master respectfully moved the chair towards the inspector. The minute he sat on it the

chair groaned and broke. Luckily Ramakrishna Iyer didn't fall down, only a leg of the chair was crushed. He got up with no change of expression on his face. By then the peon had come running.

"All the furniture in here is very bad. Who is the manager?"

"I am .....your servant"

"And the head master"

"That too.........your servant"

"Both the same servant?"

Krishna Kurup could only see the white around the iris of the inspector's eye. "How come your furniture is like this? Looks like they were made at the time when Vasco-de-Gama landed here!"

No one answered him; by now the chair from the second grade was brought to the first standard and Ramkrishna Iyer promptly sat on it.

"Register?"

Appu master seemed to wilt under that order. His hand moved mechanically. Ramakrishna Iyer opened the book the began to call out the names.

"Edachery Punathil Soopy"

"Present"

"Poothankuniyil Moidu"

"Present"

"Kambivelikkakathu Maimum"

Ramakrishna Iyer paused for a moment and said.

"All those who are inside the Kambiveli (fence) stand up" Pokkar, Aisu and Maimum got up. Then somebody from the second standard stood up and Ramakrishna Iyer turned to him.

"Why are you standing up?"

"I am also from there"

"Then you come here"

The child stood still, too scared to move. Then the attractive

Janaki Teacher gently encouraged him.

"Go on...."

When he walked into the first grade, Ramakrishna Iyer looked him over-his shaven head, buttonless shirt and his small loin cloth full of cashew stains.

"What is your name?"

"Kambivelikkakath Hasan"

"Alright"

Ramakrishna Iyer looked first at Hasan and then at the book and said. "When I come next year all of you should be out of the fence (Kambivali). By now Hasan's loin cloth was dripping wet. Seeing that Ramakrishna Iyer sent him out of the class.

Next came the session of question and answer.

"How much is 4+3+7+7+14"

"Is the earth round or flat?"

"Who lays the bigger egg-hen or cock?

"Name the king who made Taxila into a capital?"

After his session with the children, he threatened and scolded all the teachers. In between he also managed to gobble up two huge bananas a ball of flattened rice and a glass of tea. Meanwhile his peon with the sash and turban was treated with a piece of round bread and black tea. After he had eaten, he went straight to the wall to hide and have a smoke in a hurry.

Iyer sat in the he fourth standard to write the inspection report. Before he started he asked.

"When will the lunch to ready? I am in a bit of a hurry"

"Everything is ready" replied Shankara Kurup, rather apologetically.

"So soon! Then we won't let it grow cold". He appeared to think for a while then continued.

" I need two ounces of Dasamoolaristam. I have an upset

stomach".

"That is also ready" Not just two ounces, but half a bottle. But Shankara Kurup didn't mention that. (everyone knew that half a bottle was the required quantity.)

Ramakrishna Iyer sat all hunched up on the bench. Then half closing his tiny eyes, he began to write the inspection report. He held the pen like a quill; his yam like hairy fingers clung to the pen. Now and then he took a sniff out of the snuff box and sneezed away; the teacher watched him closely, highly amused at his antics.

Finally he closed the book, put the cap on top of the pen and put them on the table. Then he yawned, and stretched his hands up in the air to relax. By now the rice, chicken and dasamoolaristam had arrived. The boy who brought the food was exhausted. The tiffin box he handed was as big as the stout Ramakrishna Iyer himself. On top of it he also had to carry a bottle.

"Where should I keep this?" Holding on to the bottle of aristam the boy asked in a guilty voice.

Kannan, the nine and a half, had specifically asked him to hand over the bottle to Kurup in secret , so the boy had mistaken it for a liquor of some kind.

"Bring it here", The Fox was listening to every detail; with the bottle in his hand, he said to Shankara Kurup.

"Let the children go home. Why should they get tired unnecessarily."

"Kunjali, ring the bell" Kurup announced automatically. That made Iyer angry.

"No need for any bell or kill. Let every one go home"

Kunjali who was about to ring the bell, slowly dropped the rod to the floor. And the children quietly got out of the school. But once out, they began to shout and run.

Ramakrishna Iyer tore open the bottle wrapper, disclosing the black arishtam in the white bottle. He drank it up in one gulp, straight from the bottle and remarked.

"Very good". Again he started to write. Only now, the writing was clearer, ideas brighter and the words refined. Faster and faster

went the writing meanwhile he also had burning cigarette stuck between his fingers. Ever since a distant relative of his died of TB, Ramakrishna Iyer had stopped smoking cigarettes. Now a days just held a cigarette between his fingers, as he worked.

He wrote over forty pages of report. It was more like a chronicle of the four teachers. When it was done, he shut the book and shouted.

"Rice!"

Shankara Kurup came running to spread the banana leaf on the table. The tiffin box was dismantled into various sections. The aroma of fried chicken permeated the school filling Moosa Musaliar's mouth with water. But he turned the other way. After the meal when he was washing his hands at the door. The inspector enquired.

"Who made this?"

"Kuttappanasari" replied Shankara Kurup.

"Kuttappan the carpenter?" Repeated Ramakrishna Iyer in wonder. Yes. He is a very good carpenter sir. The day he fixed this door frame I have him one full rupee as dakshina", explained Shankara Kurup. Laughing and burping, Ramakrishna Iyer said.

"I was asking about the chef".

"Kannan, the nine and half". replied Kurup:

"Very good. But it is sad, he should have been born a woman"

The moment the peon and the master vanished from the scene the four teachers opened the book in a frenzy attacking it like a decoy learn the story of their fate.

19

Pookunji went to school alone on that day. After fixing the day for Kunjali's sunnath, Thangal had decided not to send him to school until after the circumcision. Carrying her books and the Koran - musab, Andraman accompanied Pookanji Bi to her school. When they crossed the mosque grounds Pookanji took her books from

him and ordered him to go back home. When he stood puzzled, she shouted again "G". While Andraman turned back Pookunji proceeded to the main road with the lines of an opera song on her lips. It was then she saw the mad man, Kunjahamad, on the road. He had broken out of his fetters. Dragging the chain on the gravel, he moved towards her. An ashen faced, petrified Pookanji Bi, peed in her clothes and fell to the ground with a pitious cry. Seeing her fall on the road the pedestrians came running and screaming. The children in the masjid stopped babbling and looked out in fear. Moosa Musaliar threw down his cane and ran out of the school; travellers from the railway station also joined the growing crowd. Kunjahamad glared at everyone and lifted a stone from the wayside. When he raised his hand the crowd stood back. Yet they kept calling him 'mad' and 'crazy'. By now Kunjahamad was on his way to the Arakkal house. When he reached the gate Buhari ran away with a howl and Kunjahamad got into the garden. The noise and the size of the crowd behind kept growing. Kunjahamad walked up and down the yard a few times and then threw the stone. It hit the glass door on the second floor of the house. The lovely sable door shattered to pieces.

"Who the hell......." Pookoya Thangal came out of the house; kicking off his wooden sandals he moved like a mountain towards Kunjahamad. Gripping an already limp Kunjahamed by his neck, Thangal dragged him to the gate and threw him out. He landed face down on the powdery sand outside. Moosa Musaliar, Eramullan and Bappukanaran ran forward to take him to the mosque grounds and to tie him to the rain tree. The crazy man was frothing at the mouth.

The whole village was scared of the big, fat, crazy Kunjahamad. He often broke loose of his fetters; sometimes he even had a knife in his hand. After a while the children saw him being taken away by the Mukri, axeman-Raman, black smith-Shankaran, bear-Moosa and Kunjahmad's women. He was trying to break loose again. What the children didn't see was the marks of the whip lashes on his back and shoulders.

That night Pookunji was too scared to sleep; whenever she closed her eyes she saw the mad man in front of her; hearing her cry Thangal rushed to her side. In the end he had to get Eramullan to tie an amulet on her. The same night another amulet was prepared

for Kunjali. It was done at the request of Kuraisipathu. This one was meant for the safety of the children about to have their circumcision. After all, instances of accidents due to Ossan's negligence were quite common. Pathu herself tied the amulet on Kunjali's right wrist. Twentyone knots on a yard of black string. Eramullan had enslaved a Jinn and trapped a devil on each of those knots. Every time he made a loop Eramullan uttered some Arabic words and blew hard on it. As his breath hit the chord the spells ensnared Kuraisi Pathu's heart and devil's mischief to its magic.

Arakkal house was busy getting ready for the feast of circumcision. There were only two days left. Eramullan Mukri and Buhari went from house to house inviting guests for the occasion. Altogether fiftyone families were invited, several uninvited guests were also expected. A special shed was put up in southern corner of the garden to cook. Huge copper pots and brass platters were brought from Puramari Thampuran's palace. And the chefs arrived a day earlier to get the food ready. Special beef biryani was the main item on the menu. A big calf bought for slaughter was tied to the jackfruit tree. Standing under the shade of the tree it munched on grain and lentils; dropping and making noise, it attracted every one's attention.

Ummar - the butcher came early in the morning when he began to sharpen the knife on the granite stone in the garden. Sparks flew from the blade striking against the stone. The knife with the smell of blood on it had many previous encounters with many necks. Stroking the warm blade in his hand Ummar tied the animal with a rope and pulled it hard, the calf fell down and the butcher's knife moved closer to its ever moving jaws.

Kunjali stopped looking in that direction. But he could still hear the piteous cry, the stomping of feet....... then came the smell of damp earth. Later Kunjali saw the calf's skin hanging from a mango tree. When he reached there he saw a pool of blood under the tree and a platter full of chunks of meat. Umman sat next to the platter cutting up the meat into small pieces. He must have been born with a knife in his hand. Kunjali had never seen the butcher without a knife. Allah must have created him for the sole purpose of killing animals.

By evening the petromax lamps were burning bright. When the sound of the lamps became feeble Chatrhan brought them down to pump up more air. Soon people began to trickle in. Valia Thangal sat on his chair in the front, dignified and happy. As they came in, the visitors, kissed his right hand. The Muselmen chewing betal leaves spat long and hard into the yard; they cleaned the tip of their fingers by wiping the lime on the pillars and under the tables. Soon the yard got filled with discarded beedies and cigar butts.

The uninvited children in dirty rags sat next to the wall on the bench and fought with each other. The Ossan sat close to them. On the day of the circumcision they are allowed to walk in uninvited. That is their birth-right. Everyone of them carried an arecanut fan in his hand to fan the weary child after the ceremony.

By now the garden and the house was bursting with people and their bustle. The aroma of the biryani was everywhere; some one played the gramophone kept in the corner of the pandal. Spellbound the children watched the working of the music box. They fought with each other for the blunt needles that were discarded, and the ones who lost stared at the picture of the spinning dog on His Master's Voice. Before long the stick dancers began to move to the rhythm of the music. Their shaven heads draped in silk scarfs, the men from Thazangandy swirled their sticks in the air while their feet moved in a circular patterns. As the stick dance reached its climax the kuthiyaratheeb men got ready for their act.

What followed was horrible and rather tragic. The ratheeb experts from Parakadu drank their 'Kava' and began to chant. There were eleven of them sitting in a circle. The white pillows in the middle bore hymn books. Right next to the open book was a sprinkler. A man opened its cap filled it with rose water and then sprinkled it over every one's head. After that he stuck the imported incense sticks in a holder with tiny holes. As the fumes of fragrance spiralled upwards, the stabbing started.

The men blared out songs of piety and retribution. Swaying their heads and clenching their fists in the air, they hypnotized themselves into a trance. Their profuse sweating made their clothes stick to their body. Every now and then they gulped down a glass of 'Kava' till their eyes shown with courage. Then the first man pulled out his dagger, yelling.

"Ya sheik muhaiden....." he stabbed himself on the stomach. When he withdrew the dagger, blood squirted out. But only for a moment. The next moment chanting something he massaged his wound. Immediately the opening closed, leaving not even the trace of a scar.

Gradually the ratheeb was getting fierce; In between the hymns the men stabbed themselves in various parts of their body. Then they healed their wounds. The last act was the most horrifying one. Calling out "Ya reefa - eeshik, the ratheeb expert lifted his chin up, swiftly moving his dagger to his eyes, he scooped out his eye ball and tossed it on to the plate on the pillow. The eye on the white plate looked like a jumblam. When he put it back in the socket, the rest of the group rendered the air with "Allahu...Akbar", determined to dramatise the last act. Unfortunately instead of sticking back in its place, the eye ball slipped down dangerously. During kuthiyaratheeb if the wound doesn't heal instantly, then the subsequent attempts get more and more perilous. The audience were shocked. It was a bad omen.....the beginning of something tragic. The empty socket was filled with blood. It was flowing down his cheek to his shirt. When Pookunji Bi saw that through the curtains she fainted. Thangal ran up to her and caught her in his arms. Suddenly the whole house became silent. Then looking at the women crowd, Thangal warned.

"Someone here is not clean. Who ever it is let her get out immediately. When no one moved out he was enraged.

"I'll strip everyone of you" he said.

The women were terrified. Then slowly Thangal's own wife, Attabi casually, got up from her place and pretending to see nothing walked out through the kitchen into the backyard. Thangal heaved a sigh of relief and came out.

"Begin the ratheeb again" he said. Soon the ceremony was back to where it was, with rising fervor the ratheeb men called out to 'Sheik' and placed the lifeless eye in the blood filled socket; within a second he stood up with the eye fixed in its right place.

"The wound is healed", shouted Eramullan, from the front of the house. Announcements of any kind was always his responsibility. The women seated in different rooms were

relieved.They went back to their gossip and chit chat. The bangles tingled and their lips turned red chewing pan.

Thangal's voice rose above a thousand noise.

"Serve the feast"

With that the caterers got busy. They brought the platters to the pandal and to the halls. People gathered around it in a tight fit. A man came in with a basin and a jug. The basin was kept in the he supra, when all hands joined over it, the man poured water from the jug, fingers moved and hands were washed.

Now the supras were replaced with platters full of food. One by one the hands fell into the steaming delicious biryani. When the guests finished their food and got up to wash the Ossans and the uninvited urchins sat down for their share.

Kunjali was lying on the bed in one of the inner rooms, scared stiff. Every little noise in the house passed through his ears, amplified and alarming. Then some one came into the room, the odour of the Ossan filled the room. His hands were rough and strong. Kunjali was carried down the stairs, through the back of the hall. He wanted to cry out but he couldn't. He was taken to another room on the top. There were some five men standing but he looked only at Valia Thangal, seeing him Kunjali was reassured; he cried out to him.

"Thangaluppappa........"

Thangal stooped down, took him in his arms and kissed him and said. "Don't be afraid my son on, you have Valia Thangal to protect you"

Then gently putting him down on the bed, he walked away with heavy steps. Kunjali burst into tears.

Shortly after, some one held him on his lap; he could smell the burning wick dipped in coconut oil. Some one else removed the mundu draped around his waist. One man covered his eyes. Before he could take a peek at the raised hand with the knife in it the job was done.

20

Budhan Andraman woke up with a shudder. He felt as if some one had struck him with a ship. Looking at the sky through a crack in the wall, he saw that the morning star had not yet risen. He sat up, laboriously lifting his head from the dirty pillow cover that had never seen any water. Years of sweat and salvia had turned him pillow and it's cover into a single piece of dried wax. He sat for a while holding on to the pillow that felt as hard as a rock.

The horse was still sleeping. Usually it was up before the morning star.

"Hey, Jamal" he called out to him. Lately he had begun to call the horse-Jamal. When Andraman called him tenderly, the horse always looked up, but today it just continued to sleep. Andraman raised the wick of the lamp to its maximum yet the room remained dark. He had been planning to clean up the glass shade for some time now. The red flame shown through the smoky round glass, going closer to the horse Andraman detected an unpleasant odour. Then he saw that the horse was foaming at the mouth. There was a pool of water around the horse and it seemed to sink in a sluggish sleep.

"What happened to you, my son?"

With a cry Andraman fell at the horse's neck. As his cries grew louder, the front door opened and a pot bellied Thangal walked in, on his wooden sandals.

"What's the matter?"

"The horse is sick" sobbed Andraman

"What of that? We can treat it, dog"

Saying this Thangal came in. He did walk very carefully, yet the wooden sandals sank into a pile of dung. Discarding his foot wear, Thangal moved flashing his six celled torch on the horse. Its eyes were half closed, head dropping and the mouth dripping with something that looked like soap bubbles. Gently stroking it once on the back Thangal got out of the stable quietly. As he came out, Andraman asked.

"Don't you want to ride today?"

"Yes"

"How?" Andraman was confused.

"On your back", snarled Thangal; then he went back into the house. There was no riding on that day. The horse didn't eat its food either. Andraman stayed put the stable staring at the horse and starving, once in a while he got up to massage the hose's back. Andraman looked tired, his nose appeared flatter and his eyes seemed smaller.

At noon when Thangal, Bappukanaran and Komappa Vaidyar reached the stable, Andraman was fast asleep. Hearing their foot steps, he woke up crying.

"What is it now?" asked Thangal

"I dreamt that the horse was dead".

Thangal, laughed aloud, his belly quivered like a mound of jelly.

"Is that all? Then we buy another horse."

Hearing Thangal's suggestion Andraman was desolate. He couldn't think of another horse coming into this stable. This was the colt he had known since its birth. The sole reason for his migration to a distant land. Thoroughly examining the horse the Vaidyar said,

"Looks pretty hopeless".

"Could you be more specific?" asked Thangal

"The horse has signs of rheumatism"

"In that case, what is the next step?"

"Let's try a deft remedy" said the Vaidyar; then he turned to Bappukanaran,

"Is there a medicine trough anywhere around?"

Bappukanaran was silent for a while, then brightening up he said

"Keluppanikkar down the road is getting treated in one. It should be available in two days"

"That is good" I'll prepare a special oil, leave it in the trough for six hours then massage the horse's leg with it. It might cure the horse.

"What if it doesn't work?" Thangal feared.

"Then you should just let it go - can't you get other horses?" retorted the Vaidyar.

Andraman felt mad enough to want to chop the Vaidyar's tongue and to crush it under his horses hooves. Early next morning, Thangal came dressed in his jeans and Khaki shirt, ready for his ride. Andraman brought the horse to the front. Thangal mounted him and the horse began to run. It raced, past the masjid ground to station road and gravel path ambling along the highway, and then headed for the beach. It was running but its strides were slow and strenuous.

Usually the horse dropped Thangal in front of one of the houses in the Gosai valley. But today by the time the dim outline of the hills became visible the horse was worn out to a frazzle. Knowing that if he rode it any further he would end up walking back, Thangal pulled the reins and turned the horse around to guide it back. The horse ran for a while, then it began to walk and finally it barely managed to stumble back home. An exhausted Thangal got off the horse. The animal was frothing at the mouth. Blood and bubbles dripped down its muzzle and it coughed, spilling out the burdens of its hard life.

Andraman fainted on the parapet beside the horse. Thangal remembered his father's horse going through a similar phase. His father had great faith in the 'Unani' System of medicine. Now he decided to try his father's remedy on his horse. He gave it a paste of shallots, sugar and washing soda mixed it tender coconut water. But it did no good.

21

It was coconut - husking day in Arakkal house. Workers heaped over fifty thousand coconuts on the ground. Fifteen men who were going to do the hard work fixed the doubled edged spike knife on the ground. Spitting on their palm to strengthen their grip they

picked the coconuts one by one. Next they stuck the coconut on the sharp end of the instrument. Then bending over it, they pushed the thick husk away using the whole weight of their body. One slip and their stomach would get neatly sliced into two. Deftly separating the husk and the nut in a matter of minutes the men dropped the trimmed coconuts in a mound in front and threw the fiber to their back.

Generally, such days were the lucky ones for Andraman. Copra merchants were generous enough to tip him with a silver coin but today without even a glance in their direction he headed for Mukkali a six mile trek on his swollen feet to get the Vaidyar. When he reached the house he found that the Vaidyar was not there. He had gone to supervise the preparation of a special medicine for Purameri Thampurn's wife. By the time he returned it was late. On seeing Andraman, he went in, gave a packet to his wife and came back immediately to start the next trip. Inspite of the haste he didn't forget his umbrella. After all it was the season of the winter mist.

When they began to walk, the streets were already empty. Only a postal runner with a shoulder bag and bells passed them on their way. They reached Arakkal house where pared coconuts were gathered in a great big heap as high as the house. Seeing the Vaidyar in his house Thangal was quite surprised.

"Hello Vaidyar. What brings you here?" Now it was the Vaidyar's turn to be taken aback, Andraman clarified the situation.

"I brought him."

"Um?", Thangal seemed ready to explode.

"Horse...." his one word ended in a sob. Thangal's anger melted. Turning to the Vaidyar he said.

"This horse...it is his making"

Smiling Komappa Vaidyar went in, to take another look at the horse. After a long time he came back to announce.

"This horse cannot be take for another ride."

The Vaidyar went back, down the steps, under his umbrella. That very night Thangal sent Buhari to Telichery with a letter to Kunji Raman requesting him to send him a new horse.

Andraman didn't sleep a wink that night. Though his stomach was empty, his heart was filled with sorrow. Near dawn he slipped into a slumber, suddenly, a nice strong horse and its trainer appeared in front of him. The horseman was a Singaporean like him. Andraman jumped out of his bed with a whip in his hand, the whip he had held for seventeen years. Seeing the raised whip in his hand, the horse took to its heels. It ran past the mosque road and grounds disappearing from his sight. Yet the sound of its hooves got louder and louder. Alarmed, he woke up from his sleep. He saw neither a horse nor a trainer. But he distinctly heard the sounds of horse. The clip-clop grew louder till it reached the masjid grounds. The suddenly the lights at the gate grew bright and the house came alive. The bustle in front of the house and the new odour, everything was strange to Andraman. He rubbed his eyes and looked out the stable; he saw the new horse and the horseman. But he didn't go out to greet them.

Soon the fuss in front settled. Thangal's voice boomed, Buhari, Bappukanaran and military Ibrahim attended him. Andraman slept on with his eyes shut tight; he was not going to be part of this. But Thangal knocked on his door an shouted.

"Come on, Andraman you wretch, the new horse is here." Andraman came out, pretending to be still drowsy with sleep. Thangal showed him the horse "Look, look at the new horse and another thing, you are not just a horse man anymore; you are promoted."

Andraman stood bowing his head

"Now don't wait any longer. Take your horse beyond the periyana paddy fields and set him free. Drive him away, so that he doesn't come back".

Thangal's orders turned Andraman's world topsy-turvy. He couldn't utter a word. Like a robot he took the horse out of the stable, stroked its back and then jumped up on him. The horse began to run, its last gallop with its foster father. Intoxicated by the fulfillment of this last rite, the rheumatic horse ran fast but by the time it reached the periyana fields it staggered, blood and foam trickled down its mouth. Andraman got down from the horse and lifted his whip. Driven by some beastly force he whipped the horse hard. A shocked horse, arched its back in pain and stared at

Andraman. It couldn't comprehend what was going on. With its head tilted to a side the horse gazed at Andraman with sad eyes.

But Andraman continued to whip him with all his might. When it couldn't bear it any longer, the horse bolted and took off. It raced across the field, to the rail on the other side. As it ran along the trace its pace grew slower, yet its size got smaller. Finally it diminished to a dot and disappeared in the distance. Andraman's eyes were filled with tears. Devastated, he sat on the ground. He wasn't sure how long he sat there. After a period of numb trance, he woke up with a heaving heart and started to search for his horse. Dragging his swollen feet he walked on and on by the railway track. Roaring trains went past him. Spitting fire and smoke. After a while he saw a man coming with a big basket on his head. He must have been on his way to the market.

"Where are you coming from?" Andraman asked sadly.

"From Mayyazhi"

"Did you happen to see a horse anywhere there?"

"A horse!"

"Yes, my horse"

"Ha ...Ha......" the man walked away, balancing himself on the track like a rope walker.

22

The same day as the new horse arrived in Arakkal house, a drama troupe alighted on the railway station in Karakkad. Since the troupe came with a lot of luggage from loud speakers to petromax lamps at the station the guard had to stand with the red flag in his hand for a long time. The station there had no platforms; that made the unloading even harder.

There was no other passenger to get in or out of any other compartment. So the drama troupe got the undivided attention of the audience. The troupe leader dressed in long white kurtha and

black bordered dhoti stood watching his workers. Occasionally twisting his big mustache and grooming his long hair he glared at them. His father taught him to be ruthless with servants. Koran from Thekkgil house walked into the station.

"Sorry, I got a bit late." he smiled.

"No, no, actually you are not late. The train just happened to come on time. Something that has never happened before".

Brahamadattan stood with folded hands in greeting. He was full of admiration for Koran; every year Koran got this troupe stage his plays for three weeks - a drama, a week was norm.

During that time he also managed to write all the plays to be performed in different villages in the coming year. A room at the west end of Thekkyil house was his workshop. Generally he got up at four, in the morning, bathed, and then sat on the rose-wood chair to write. He never dried his hair or body. Shaking the water off his long hair, dressed only in a towel he wrote till seven o' clock in the morning; now and then drops of water spread ink on the paper covered with his writing. In the morning when Kannan knocked at the door with a brass glass in hand, Brahamadattan opened the door, took the sweet toddy from him and drank it up in one gulp; after that he went back to bed and got up only at noon.

As the group moved on, they saw Gabriel the station master waiting to collect their tickets at the iron fence. He was in his uniform; his solemn face mirrored the dignity of his office. He collected their tickets, counted their heads and then let them out. Then rolling up the flag, he tucked it under his arm and went into play cards with his wife. Those days, the station also housed the master's family.

At the sight of the three bullock carts loaded with things, seven or eight young men and workers moved down the road. Thangal standing under the rain tree saw them too. Seeing Koran's familiar face in the group, he clapped his hand to get his attention like a man calling the crows to their food. When he saw Thangal, Koran grinned from ear to ear. The wide grin stuck to his face till he reached Thangal. Thangal was itching to tell him to use a tooth brush. But being a man of the world, he resisted the idea. Instead he asked,

"Who are all these people? What is going on.....?"

"This is the drama troupe; Didn't you know?"

"How will I know all this, Koran? I'm a poor guy who has to work abroad to make a buck" replied Thangal sounding woeful. Koran didn't reply.

"Where is the play?"

"In the Periyavayal as usual"

Half of the huge Periyavayal belonged to Koran and the other half to Purameri Thampuran. The plays were usually staged after the January harvest. By then the fields were made smooth and flat by the workers and stage was build in the southend of the field. Every year thousands of people came to see the plays from villages far and wide. But none had to buy any tickets. Koran took care of all the expenses.

Koran explained every detail to Thangal, all the while the drama troupe waited patiently on the road and the bullocks deposited great mounds of dung on the road; then Koran called out to the play wright.

"Swamy, please come here." The leader and the troupe inched towards the mosque grounds. Shaking hands with the writer adorned with a silk shawl on his shoulder, Thangal said in English.

"Very glad to meet you"

Koran translated.

"He resides in Singapore; talks Malayalam only when he is here."

"That is very good" said the playwright. Pointing to two handsome men with smooth shaven face, Thangal asked,

"Who are these?"

"They are in the troupe but they play women characters" replied the writer rather apologetically.

"I would also like to have a play performed" said Thangal looking at Swamy and Koran.

"No problem in that"

"Then I'll invite you home?"

"Not now"

"O.K then I'll see you later". Thangal stood looking at them till they disappeared in a distance.

23

Kunjali was all alone in the room, he didn't know for how long. How many days more should he rest there? He didn't have an answer for that either. The days just slipped by. From morning till night he was fairly stuffed with food. It started with pathiri and beef in the morning, then at eleven they fed him fried eggs and boiled banana, lunch consisted of roasted fish and Basumati rice, tea with heavy cream and egg pathiri at four followed by fishmouli, vegetables and kanji at night. He was tired of eating and growing fat. Time seemed to stand still in the room from where he could see nothing but the sky. Then one day, as he was staring out of the window, Pookunji came in.

When she walked in, the room was filled with the fragrance of mango blossoms. Kunjali widened his nostrils to inhale it, and Pookunji put a tender mango in his hand.

Is it windy outside?" he asked.

"Very", she said, "And a lot of mangoes have fallen".

She sat on his bed. Usually she visited him in the afternoon when Attabi took her nap. Her mother didn't like her visits to his room. She often reminded her that he was a bastard; once, a few years ago Pookunji also had called him a bastard. That was the only time he had ever cried in front of her. Seeing him cry Pookunji was completely taken aback. She didn't know the meaning of the word. But Kunjali knew. He had been called that many times by different people. After a while he wiped his tears and began to smile. Now with the tender mango in his hand, he had the same smile on his face. So Pookunji asked.

"Why are you smiling?"

"Seeing you"

"Seeing me?" before she could complete the sentence Attabi's voice rose on the stairs.

"Where is the little devil? Must be sitting with that bastard!"

A startled Pookunji ran down the stairs. On her way she slipped down the stairs and fell; hearing her scream the whole house was in an uproar. Thangal's voice rose above every one else's. Kunjali was eager to go down and have a look. He was not supposed to get up. Yet he stood up and looked down the stairs, when the clamour subsided he turned back to his bed. Seeing drops of blood on the floor, he looked at the cloth draped around him, there was a big patch of blood on that too. Hearing him shriek, Valiyathangal came running. He scolded him roundly before sitting on the bed and checking the wound again.

"It is going to be alright?"

"Of course!"

With that reassurance he went down the stairs. After a while he came back with a tube of medicine in hand; when Thangal sat on his bed, it groaned. When he squeezed the tube of medicine on the spot that was still bleeding an yellow paste came out like chakkuli dough. On the fourth day the wound was completely healed. The pain disappeared. The same evening Pookunji came up the stairs again. This time she smelled of attar.

Kunjali was apprehensive.

"I thought you were Thangalappappa....!"

"What a nice scent this is! Uppappa is fast asleep in the room. I stole this from his cupboard" She said.

Kunjali pressed his face on her dress to breath in the sweet smell.

"Tomorrow I go to the mosque again," he said. He felt as if he was being born again. Tomorrow would be the last day of Sunnath.

He would get up early in the morning, bathe, get dressed in new clothes, dab a bit of attar on himself and then go to the mosque. Tomorrow was the day; after that he wouldn't have to stay cooped up in this room. Good-bye to loneliness! From tomorrow Kunjali would be part of the everyday world. Overwhelmed with sheer joy, Kunjali hugged Pookunjibi.

"You bastard!" hissed Attabi from behind.

Kunjali trembled in fear. Attabi appeared like a hurricane eyes

glowing, chest heaving violently, and her mouth flooded with curses. Grinding her teeth in anger, she clutched Pookunjabi like an octopus. Holding her tight she slapped her hard on the face. Her tender cheeks turned red and her eyes were filled with tears. As the mother dragged the daughter down the stairs, Attabi swore again.

"Bastard!"

24

Late in the night when Andraman came back it was already pitch dark in the Mosque grounds. Only a dull red light filtered out of an open window. Andraman went to it. He saw Eramullan sitting like a log on a mat and reading the Koran. The book was left open on a piece of mat, next to it was the lamp on a small wooden stand. Eramullan's eyes were shut, his lips didn't move. But his head swayed to and fro like that of a snake.

"Eramullanikka!" Andraman called.

"Who?" Who is here in the middle of the night".

"Me, Andraman".

"What's it , rascal? Don't you sleep at all? Why walk around like a devil at night?

"I have come from far abandoning my horse".

Eramullan raised the wick now the light shown a little better.

"What do you want now?"

"Light"

Eramullan jumped out of the window with the lamp in his hand. Side by side they walked close to the wall. In the dense darkness of the mosque grounds they appeared like two big fire flies. When they came close to the gate,

Andraman said.

"This is enough".

Eramullan went back with his lamp. As Andraman barely touched the door he heard Buhari's clear voice from within.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Andraman."

Buhari opened the gate and Andraman got in. Buhari was muttering something. Andraman went straight into the stable. He saw the new horse in there. He pushed the door but it was locked. Only then did he see the new stable hand sleeping on the bed that had been his for a countless years. And there was a new horse in the place of his horse.

"Oh.......My Jamal......" he cried, calling for his horse.....but no one heard him.

Aimlessly he wandered around in the huge garden. Dew drops were dripping down the fruit trees and the house stood solid like a dark fort. He stared at it for a long time. Then with a long sigh he turned back to the gate house. There Buhari was lying with a beedi on his lips. Once up, he never went back to sleep. Even otherwise he hardly ever slept at night. Pookoya Thangal always said that Buhuri was like a bat.

"You can sleep there", Buhari said, pointing to the empty veranda on the other side. Andraman sat down and shook the dust off his feet. He looked at the old mat and pillow. Those were used by the fakirs who came in search of a shelter for the night. It was very common in Arakkal house to have a traveller or two at night to sleep.

Andraman slumped onto the mat. In front of him the door was closed. Behind him he could see the sky and it was dark with clouds, an uncompromising gray on the onset of summer. Though it was only the beginning of January it was already hot. Andraman couldn't sleep at all, his heart was burning too.

Every time he dozed off he heard the foot steps of the new horse. That reminded him of his Jamal. He tried hard not to think of him, but the trampling of hooves in the stable made it hard. Troubled and upset he sat up on the mat. Then he went into the garden. He just wanted to get out and wander about towns and villages in search of his Jamal. Then he remembered Kuraisipathu, how could he go away without seeing her one last time and without bidding

good-bye to her. But when he reached the kitchen quarters he was hesitant. He stood there for a while listening to the ducks and hens. The flapping of their wings frightened him. Then finally mustering enough courage, he knocked at her door for a long time.

Suddenly he heard her walking up. She opened the door and asked.

"Who is there in the middle of the night?"

"It's me. Andraman".

"Um. What do you want? I've kept your supper aside".

"I don't want any".

"Then?"

"I am going"

That made her angry.

"Go then! Get lost in any part of the world. Coming in the middle of the night to.........mad cap!"

She shut the door with a bang; next day morning when Buhari got up he saw the mat neatly rolled up on the veranda.

25

"Bangles......Bangles for sale!", Madhavi Chettichy called out. Every year she come around during the time of fair in the Arakkal temple.

Madhavi Chettichy was beautiful..She was not dark like other chettichies. Tangy as an orange when she wore a light blue sari and a white blouse with dots. Under the blouse a corset full of happiness. Her sensuously fleshy belly was pretty too. She arrived with her Chettiyar. But once they reached the fair, he went off on his own.

Carrying a big basket full of bangles on his head, a black block of a boy walked in front of the Chettichy. Usually he was the one who called out "Bangles....Bangles for sale". Madhavi Chettichy followed close behind with a box in her hand. That box was full of

very expensive bangles that were costlier than gold ornaments. Holding the box Chettichy walked straight without a glance on either side. Her silver anklets tinkled in the air.

Standing in a room on the second floor of her house Pookunji saw the beautiful Chettichy and the boy with a basketful of bangles on his head. She ran down the stairs and along with Kuraisipathu, ran out the house to get them. They came in through the back door - Chettichy and the boy. Together they brought down the basket. In it were rolls and rolls of bangles, Madhavi took a pair of bangles in her hand and quoted a price, then she sang its praises. Attabi wore bangles till her elbow on both hands, she also got a few small ones for Pookunji. When she spotted a small bottle of suruma, Pookunji just stood there pointing at it. Then Chettichy said.

"It's very good suruma, Khojathi suruma. Look at my eyes. I've been using it for the last fourteen years. Ever since I became a woman......"

Pookunji gazed into Madhavi's eyes. They were deep and shimmering like a well full of water in the rainy season but the suruma was balled up in the corner of the eye like the tip of a match stick. Madhavi took a tiny bottle as big as her little finger and stirring it with both sides of the suruma stick, applied it on Pookunji's eyes. At first it stung, then it felt cool and minty. When she closed her eye-lids, Pookunji could feel a drop of tear at the corner of her eye.

There were a lot of other cosmetics in the box, scented hair oil, decorations for the hair, irresistible attar that could put a night to shame and many more things like that. From the far corner of the kitchen, maids in their soot-covered clothes looked on. Chettichy got out of the house and walked through the grounds, reaching the front of the house she glanced in the right place and saw Thangal sitting in front. With nonchalant ease she walked to him. The boy followed her.

"One and a half rupees", she said without putting the basket down. Every year it was Thangal who paid her the money.

"My son also needs bangles".

Hearing him Madhavi Chettichy sat on the carpet crossing her legs and ankle. She opened her box. Her fingers frolicked among the precious bangles. When she looked at Thangal with her suruma-

lined dove eyes, a smile spread on her crimson lips. She covered her heaving bosom with the end of her saree.

Pookoya Thangal didn't look at the bangles at all. He was looking at the Chettichy and his heart whispered, what a beautiful Chettichy. In great excitement, he said,

"The boy is sleeping upstairs he cannot come down, so you come up".

Chettichy went up the stairs behind Pookoya Thangal, Kunjali was in the room. He was out on the veranda, gazing at the sky through the window, looking at him Chettichy said.

"Call your son......"

As he closed the door behind them, Thangal said.

"In a while".

Chettichy didn't reply.

The following year Chettichy didn't go around selling bangles during the temple fair. She had a two month old baby boy to take care of. He first baby after eleven years of marriage!

The year after that she came again. Then besides the box, basket, and the boy the Chettiyar had a bottle of ghee and a bundle of incense with him; as soon as they got off the train, they went straight to the mosque ground. Standing solemnly near Valiya Thangal's tomb, they lit the incense sticks one by one and then placed it around the "misan stone". After that they went to the Arakkal gate with the bottle. That year Madhavi Chettichy didn't carry the box; instead she had a year old baby in her hand. As they walked through the grounds , Chettiyar turned to touch the baby, he said.

"The result of my offering and prayers".

26

A total of three plays were performed at Peeriyana Vyal. By the time the program got over the paddy field become as hard as a rock and as flat as a piece of dry land. The weary troop was getting to go. They pulled the stage down, rolled up the curtains, bundled up the bamboo poles and packed the petromax lamps in boxes cushioned with hay. While they were waiting to take leave of Koran, Bappukanaran, the overseer, came in. He extended Thangal's invitation to Koran and the playwright. Leaving their luggage, they went to Thangal's House.

Seeing the dramatist cross his yard Thangal got up from his huge chair, scratched his backside, refastened the lungi, and went forward to meet them. Thangal gave out his hand to help them onto the veranda. Military Ibrahim was there too. He was a well known harmonium player in the area besides he had served in the army for ten years. He was reputed to have been in the I.N.A with Subhas Chandra Bose, and when the Japanese invaded Burma he was in Rangoon. Even after he left the army, he never took the plate shaped hat off his head. Military Ibrahim always walked with his head bent. The story was that he had lost a gold sovereign, that was once tied around his neck and was perpetually looking for it.

Pookoya Thangal conveyed all this information in one breath to the playwright and through it all Ibrahim waited with his eyes glued to the ground.

"Do you want to join our troupe", asked the playwright.

"Fine with me. Having cleaned the toilets in the army, why should I object to this?" he said.

The dramatist stood silent. He always reacted like that, when he heard thunder. Sitting in his big chair, with his legs stretched upon its arms, Thangal continued,

"You should stage a play here. A good drama".

"Sure".

"But I heard you were leaving today".

"No, I won't leave this place for a week. Your wish is my command".

That made Thangal very happy.

"Alright then, he said.

Soon a stage was being built next to the Karakkad madrassa amongst the nochil bushes. Every muslim who heard the news put his finger on his nose and asked.

"Are we allowed to have plays?"

The news became the talk of the village, an issue to be discussed by one and all. By the time it created a storm, the stage was completed. On Friday after the jumma prayers, when the congregation was about to disperse, Thangal announced,

"Tomorrow night is the play. All of you should come".

"A play?" asked paramel Muthukkoya Thangal. Though he wasn't as distinguished as Pookoya Thangal he too belonged to Big Tharavad.

"That's right. A play. Those who don't come to see it, won't be allowed in the mosque" No one dared to comment.

The resentful ones had to swallow their anger in silence.

On Saturday morning the drummer and the children started out on a procession of publicity. There were members of the troupe as well. Kumara Marar, the son of Narayana Marar, was a neighbour of the dramatist. Since there was no opening for a drummer in the temple, he had joined the drama troupe as their professional drummer. Hanging his drum over his bare left shoulder and beating it with a stick in his right hand the Marar marched on the muddy red road, sweat steaming down his underarm. Behind him the children marched singing and holding banners. The big outstretched banner had details of the play written on it.

"Tonight at Nine near Karakkad Muslim School"

"The End of the world"

(A muslim social play)

Come!See! And enjoy!

A sweat-soaked drummer and the children went from village to village spreading the message. For them this was also a performance. Every member of the troupe had a part to play in the drama even those who held the lighted lamps.

By four in the evening the procession group came back and collapsed in front of the stage. Looking at their dirt covered feet, Thangal gave a silver coin to Marar with a comment:

"Here is an award worth your while"

A first they arranged some fifteen chairs in front of the stage. Behind the chairs, benches were placed; some benches that had only three legs were made steady with the support of the four legged ones. Now that the seats were ready, the actors with make-up on their face began to peep outside. After a while they began to sing a song. It was already nine o' clock. But no one had shown up to see the play. Only Thekkil Koran was seated in a corner on a chair.

"What is this Thangal? What happened?"

Thangal was truly humiliated. In spite of his strict orders not a single soul had turned up for the play.

When it was ten o' clock, with an empty feeling in his ear, Thangal walked towards his house. He had taken certain decisions. In a short while the women came out through the gate. First came Attabi, then Pookunjibi, Kunjali, Kurasipathu, Hydrose, all the kitchen maids and finally Buhari. He locked the gate and stuffed the key into his pocket; there were around twenty people in all. Thangal lead the way followed by Attabi, Pookunji and then came the rest of the retinue walking close to the mosque grounds they went across the station road to reach the schools grounds.

It was Thangal who took a seat first. Pookunji and Kunjali sat on either side of him and Attabi sat next to Pookunji. Their entourage sat behind them.

"You may begin now"

Pookoya Thangal's deep voice gave the signal to go ahead. It was an order. With no delay of any kind, the curtain promptly went up. It was a very interesting play, the whole bunch of actors had turned themselves into muslim men and women.

It was the story of Doomsday. Pointing to a woman in the play Attabi said, "What a lovely lady!"

Thangal corrected, "You goof! That is a man"

Attabi laughed, covering her face, considering it to be a joke. While the prophecy of the angel on the day of judgement was being enacted something terrible happened. There was smoke rising from a corner of the stage. Then suddenly the whole stage was engulfed in smoke when that cleared there was an errie yellow light everywhere. A light with lots of orange tongues. Buhari shrieked "Fire!" And the actors jumped down the stage. The make-up men an the prop artist, escaped through back stage. Buhari came running with a bucket of water. But Thangal stopped him on the track.

"Don't use it. Let it burn out"

Then he walked up the stage with a banana plant in his hand. It was a sort of miracle. A virgin plant. With that young plant he pounded the fire, over and over again. Soon the blazing fire died down leaving a little whiff of smoke. After a while that too was cleared.

Thangal got down the stage. The playwright hugging him said apologetically, "God's Anger"

"No, the devil's revenge", Thangal paused a while and continued. "But I am happy, he just played with a little fire. What we saw was great".

Later they announced over the loud speaker with regret that they had to stop the play in the middle due to unforeseen circumstances. It was clear that the playwright was not willing to sacrifice the spirit of the performance for lack of audience.

On their way back home Buhari walked in front with a flaming torch in hand. Next to him was Thangal, followed by his entourage. As they were crossing the grounds a shadow came crouching out of the darkness. In the light of his flame Buhari clearly saw the swollen feet festering wounds, stomach flattened with hunger, long beard and hair and the sunken eyes all covered in dirt. It was none other than Andraman, the horse trainer.

Before any one could as him anything, Andraman asked.

"Who are you?"

Buhari was not irate. Andraman's question seemed extremely appropriate to the situation, so he just said:

"I am Buhari"

He couldn't make out any of the noises that came out of Andraman's dry throat. So he asked again.

"Where were you all this time"

A pitiful moan was the answer he got.

"Have you seen my horse?"

Thangal and his group trudged on through the grounds. Andraman and his swollen feet moved farther and farther away from them.

27

One night all of a sudden Attabi turned her daughter out of her room.

"You are a big girl now. You can't sleep here anymore", she said.

So, Kuraisipathu moved Pookunji's bed and pillow into another room a little closer to the kitchen.

Now the room extending from the kitchen was empty, the room where Kunjali and Pathu slept for years was now filled with humming mosquitoes with nothing to do. After his Sunnath Kunjali's bed shifted upstairs to the room next to Thangal's office. The servant boy Hydrose slept in the same room in the floor to keep him company.

All the lights in the house except the ones in the kitchen was already out, yet Pookunji could hear Thangal pacing up and down in his room upstairs. Listening to his heavy footsteps, Pookunji was afraid that the floor would cave in under his weight. Thangaluppapa is not sleeping; what is he thinking about? She wondered.

From the kitchen she heard the clatter of plates and vessels; some one was drawing water from the well. Sleepless, Pookunji listened to it all; before long all the clamour subsided. Then she heard Kuraisi

Pathu coming in with a hurricane camp in hand. Her wooden sandals were completely worn out. She had been asking for a new pair for quite some time. There were bought two years ago, at the onset of Ramzan. No its heels had become so thin that her feet were touching the floor.

Pathu spread a mat on her cot and then pulled out the prayer robe from the basket in the corner. The long garment slithered out like a snake out of the basket. Dressed in her prayer clothes Pathu began her prayer, she usually said all her prayers at night, after all the work was done. By the time she finished the prayers for the whole day she was sweating.

Pookunjibi shut her eyes tight and Pathu put out the light. The bed groaned again. It was dark and quiet everywhere. Pookunji wasn't sleeping; she lay with her eyes and ears wide open.

Then she heard Andimalyan drumming on the drum from the temple. He was one of Thangal's tenants and lived very close to the Madrasa in his little hut. At noon during lunch break when she sat amidst the nochil bushes sucking sugar candy (jaggery) Pookunji always watched his house. He was busy tuning the drum. She saw the children playing in mud and the youngest one filling his mouth with mud. She was sure that small kid ate only mud. Whenever she looked at his house, Pookunji saw the father fiddling with the drum and the kid stuffing himself with mud. Sometimes Andimalyan's wife drawing water from the well, would throw down the vessel and come running to the baby. After lifting it up, she would plant him on her hips and put her finger in his mouth in an attempt to get all the mud out.

"Marie Kurippe, don't eat it, you'll die" she would croon.

The beat on the drum was getting stronger and stronger. It must be close to the season for Thira in the temple thought Pookunji. She had never leen to the temple.

But she loved the Thira. Because then, all the Theeya houses in the neighborhood would be buzzing with activity. If any important work was proposed the workers invariably said:

"After the Thira"

This was the season when friends and relatives would come visiting the people in the village. Pookunji could watch the people

dressed in new clothes going to see the Thira. Then the men smelled of arrack and the women of scented hairoil.

One day of the Thira she could never get any sleep even if she managed to catch a wink, the sound of gun powder and crackers would awaken her. Then standing near the window she would watch the comet crackers racing with a fiery tail in the clear blue of the summer sky to explode into brilliant patterns while the bomb crackers made the biggest bang. After a long time when the fireworks stopped she would get back to her bed with a heavy heart and try to sleep.

Thinking of the Thira Pookunji became restless.

"Aren't you asleep dear?" asked Kuraisi Pathu. "No" said Pookunji feeling happy. She was reassured that Pathu was also lying awake like her. Perhaps she was listening to the drums too.

"It's very very nice, isn't it?" asked Pookunji "What? the rice?" Kuraisi Pathu who thought of nothing but feeding people, asked.

"No, the drums".

"Oh the drums. What fiddle sticks!" retorted Pathu angrily. That made Pookunji sad. She began to cry. Hearing her sob Pathu sprang up from her bed and went to Pookunjibi. Sleeping next to her bed and wiping the streams of tears from her cheeks, she said:

"Don't cry, darling. I'll tell you a nice story." Instantly Pookunjibi stopped crying. Whether in the day or in the night, what Pookunji liked best was to listen to stories. Stories were her very life.

"Do you want to hear the story of a Jinn or a devil?"

"Jinn of course" replied Pookunjibi. She not only hated the devil but found him most odious.

Pathu started her story. Once upon a time in a kingdom there was a princess. She was extremely beautiful. Both the king and the queen were very, very fond of her. The queen called her honey. When she grew big, a scholarly lady called Hatoor taught the princess the Koran. She also told her many stories-stories of Jinn, Malak and Apsaras.

The princess grew into a beautiful woman. She fell in love with a prince who was the son of her father's enemy. They had met

during a hunting trip. Many princes came from far and wide to marry the beautiful princess. But she rejected all her suitors. She wanted to marry only her love. She was heart-broken, wore only black clothes and fasted, prayed and cried for many days. But the king didn't show any compassion. He forcibly married her off to another prince without her consent. The poor princess with a burning heart fell into a valley of tears.

A great tragedy happened on the night of their marriage. The bride and groom were sleeping in their flower decked, fragrant filled room. It was late at night suddenly someone opened the window, outside the moon was streaming down. Then she saw her prince smiling and calling her from the other side. The princess looked at the sleeping prince. Smoothing down her dress she opened the door to get out. Together they came out of the palace. Outside the sky was clear and bright and a soft breeze caressed them.

All the guards were sleeping with their spears resting next to them. Days of preparation for the wedding had worn them out. Walking in silence the prince and the princess passed though the fort and the beach but they didn't stop. The prince led the way and the princess followed his huge shadow. They walked and walked and walked and walked away from existence.

Next day in the morning when the bridegroom woke up, the princess wasn't there. It was still dark outside. He called her many times. But there was no answer. He got up and found the door ajar. The entrance to the palace was wide open and so were all the other doors. The prince screamed; the whole palace woke up and the king and queen rushed to him, rubbing their eyes.

"Where is the princess?", he roared and the whole palace ran helter skelter.

By now, dawn was breaking in the east. The ministers, warriors and soldiers went in every direction in search of the princess. Finally it was a deputy minister who found her. The princess was dead; she slept on the beach like a mermaid fondled by the waves".

After the last sentence Kuraisipathu was silent for a while so Pookunji asked,

"And then?"

"And then every one went back to the palace"

With that Pookunjibi fell silent too. It was Kuraisi Pathu who asked,

"Who killed the princess?"

"The prince who loved the princess - enemy's son" pat came Pookunjibi's answer.

"No, it was not the prince; he drank poison and killed himself on the day of her wedding. But there was another person who loved the princess more than her prince. It was a Jinn - a man Jinn. He killed the princess".

"Why did he kill the princess?" asked Pookunjibi "Ha....Ha....Ha......." laughed Kuraisipathu loudly. Don't you know? To kiss and then kill beautiful girls is their hobby"

Pathu ended her story. Then she sighed. Her stories usually ended with a sigh. After that she would lie quietly without a word until morning.

Two little warm streaks ran down Pukunjibi's cheeks. Drops of tears fell on her pillow. Her heart was heavy and her throat was choking. Then gradually the pain in the throat became less, heart felt lighter, tears stopped and her cheeks were not damp.

Andimalayan was still playing on the drum. It usually started with a steady pace, climbed into a gripping climax and then faded into an echo.

In the lull of the steady rhythm of the drum Pookunjibi fell asleep.

28

Eramullan felt completely exhausted with the last call for prayer. Never before had he ever felt this tired and worn out. When the last 'Allahu-Akbar' got stuck in his throat, he had dislodged it with great difficulty and thrown it out.

He felt his throat bulging and swelling and his mouth filling up with some salty liquid. He spat it out through the window. Instead of falling down, the thick phlegm hung like a spider from his

moustache and when he shook his head it plopped on his shirt. When he got up to clean it, in the light of the kerosene lamp he saw the red stains. Eramullan moved closer to the light. Sick at the sight of the blood, he flopped doom on the floor near the lamp and sat in shock for a long time.

He heard people coughing and washing near the water tank. Life there had already started, they were musalman who had heard his call for prayer and come there. After washing and fastening their dhoti they came into the mosque. The took off their turban to wipe their face.

After the sunnath prayer they waited for Thangal. Then they saw a light moving; Buhari was coming with a lantern in hand, Pookoya Thangal was with him. Walking past graves, cicadas and poison snakes, they reached the mosque. Thangal washed his legs and went into the mosque. Buhari lowered the wick and kept the light on the steps. Outside it was very dark. He sat near the lantern. Buhari never went into the mosque. He never prayed either; many people were quite annoyed about it, specially because he was Thangal's gurkha. But Buhari had never been to a madrassa and he had never learned the koran or the prayers. If anyone insisted on his praying he would just say.

"I don't know".

"All you have to do is imitate others, that is the unwritten law." Some die-hards wouldn't give up. Then his answer was "Am I a monkey or something to do things I do not know? Please don't force me."

With that last word even Pookoya Thangal left him alone.

Looking at Buhari crouching near the light Thangal said.

"You take care of my slippers not from thieves but from dogs"

Inside the mosque everybody was praying, they stood up; then the whole group bent forward like slaves then they folded in like the petals of a lotus. After the prayers every one dispersed. Buhari and Thangal were the last to come out. They always came in late and went out last.

Eramullan's throat was still hurting and feeling of blockage persisted. Once more he cleared his throat and spat out. Each time

there was more and more blood. But he didn't stop working, actually he couldn't. The water tank was already empty and he had to fill it. Standing close to the well he began to pull the winch and it began to groan. When the bucket came up, close to his face, he pulled it towards him and pored the water into the cement canal. With a gurgling sound the water ran through the canal to the tank. This was his daily routine. Everyday after each prayer session he would fill up the tank. But today his hands were knocking against the bucket and hurting. The old bucket was full of holes so by the time he pulled it up there was only half a bucket of water in it. He was tired of asking for a new one. Today he didn't sing his favorite love songs. All his thoughts seemed to pivot around just one thing-his failing voice.

Until now, from Cannanoor to Calicut there was not a Muezzin who could call for prayer as loudly as Eramullan. His sonorous voice could reach very far. It woke the sleeping, startled those who were already up and sent the children howling. That famous voice was now fading. He lived in the mortal fear of the day when thangal would ask him if he was reducing the call for prayer to a murmuring secret. Only when Buhari and Thangal walked away from the mosque was Eramullan relieved. He gulped down a mouthful of water.

After his work he went to Arakkal house with a flaming torch in hand. Three times a day food was served there for him but he had to wait till the last man had eaten to get his food. Waving his torch, to let the damp coconut leaves burn better he walked on. Instead of light the torch spewed a lot of smoke and most of it went straight into his lungs.

In the dim light of an obstinate flame Eramullan groped towards the house. Once he stopped to watch the sparks from the flame race with the glow worms.

When he reached the gate he saw that the front was empty. Everyone inside was busy eating. Eramullan sat opposite Buhari on the cold cement floor, Buhari was as usual puffing at his small piece of beedi. No one ever see him smoke a whole beedi. He swallowed the smoke, coughed with tears in his eyes and then spat out.

"Why can't you keep a spittoon for yourself, you devil?"

Eramullan asked. "Why should I have a spittoon? Isn't the yard good enough?"

"What if it gets filled up?" Eramullan retorted.

"Then I'll spit on your face" That was the end of their conversation. Eramullan was thoroughly insulted. Someone came out of the house burping. As the men went out the gate the aroma of food cooked in ghee filled the entire area.

"Come on" the servant boy called out to them from the house. That meant that their supper was ready. Hydrose had been in service in Arakkal house ever since Eramullan had known him. No one could guess his exact age. The fellow had a Chinese face with no hair at all. Always at sixteen the boy was four and a half feet in height, fair, and had small gray eyes and rather feminine features. His lungi was permanently slipping down. He could never fasten a knot tightly so Thangal teased him about tying a secure a knot at least around his bride.

The boy wielded considerable influence in the front part of the house. He was the true provision master. Only through him could people get something to eat or drink between the kitchen and the front of the house. He had never left those parts for anything else in life. He only had contempt for people who came regularly to eat at the house. He eyed such people as if he were looking a dead lizard, lying belly up, on the floor.

"What are you staring at?" questioned Eramullan.

"Your face" said the boy. Then with eyes full of scorn he indicated the place and said.

"Go drink your kanji."

A big 'Kasa' with kanji and a plate full curry made with green banana and goat innards was laid out for them. The bowl with the kanji also had two spoons in it. Eramullan took one and Buhari the other. Spoon by spoon, Buhari swallowed the kanji greedily. He guzzled down the curry, not even bothering to chew the long pieces of meat. Eramullan wasn't hungry. Usually they had something of a competition and ate their food fast till their wooden spoons clashed with each other. But today Eramullan got up before the bowl was empty.

The sound of belching came when he was washing hands. It was Thangal. Slowly sliding down his chair Thangal lit his Singapore cigar blend the smoke into the darkness and called

"Dey, Eramullan"

"Yes sir" he sat close to the chair on the floor.

"What man, have you reduced the call for prayer to a murmur?"

Eramullan didn't reply. Thangal continued.

"You should shout it out. Only then can the people busy with work hear it, and come to the mosque, mind you"

Eramullan sat still for long. In the light of the number fourteen lamp Thangal's face shone. He said

"Sing a song Eramullan".

His throat was still sore and aching but how could he refuse Pookoya Thangal's request? Forgetting his pain he began tossing:

The tinkle of the anklet

Turned the head of the master

The tinkle of the anklet

Heralded the coming of the lover

The tinkle of the anklet

brought the lovely korathy......

"Stop. Stop" gestured Thangal, "What happened to your vigor and voice?"

Still Eramullan kept quiet.

"Did you go out to scream Sindabad last night?"

This time Eramullan tried to reply but the words got stuck in his throat. This was the best time to tell Thangal of his troubles and pains but the words balled up in his throat choking him. His eyes brimming with tears he looked down. Though the lamp was burning bright above his head, he face was hidden in its shadow.

29

Just before dawn when Pookoya Thangal was getting ready to ride his horse Bappu Kanaran came running to the house. As he reached the guard house he fell unconscious and Buhari woke up with a shock. Actually he didn't wake up, because he never really slept at night, nevertheless he was shocked. Before he could ask "Who is it?" Bappukanaran muttered and 'oh' and crumbled face down on the steps. Buhari raised the flame of his lantern and recognised the man at his feet.

"My Pokki".........cried Kanaran

"What happened to Pokki?' Buhari asked trying to lift Kanaran from the floor.

"She is unconscious".

Pookoya Thangal had already reached the scene by now. He cancelled his ride, led the horse back to the stable and turned towards Kanaran's house. With a lantern and a torch in hand thangal, Buhari, Kanaran and the horse-man walked to the house.

A small kerosene lamp was burning in front of Bappukanaran's house. Its flame which was already in its last throes, went out as Thangal stepped on to the veranda. The whole house was stinking with a horrible smell of death and decay. Thangal went in flashing his Singapore torch. The room was as slushy as a pond. Pokki was lying on a mat spread close to the wall; she looked more like a wet rag, her pillow was covered with vomit and her clothes were drenched.

"Her bowels are draining like a broken water pipe", said an old woman who was attending to her. Thangal's clean white feet were steeped in the mire of dung and faeces. Bending close to her mat, Thangal flashed his light on Pokki's face. Her eyes were closed. Trying to pry open her eyes he flashed the light again. The small eyes didn't respond to the light. Then he checked her pulse. That too had ceased.

Within seconds Pookoya Thangal was out of the room. Bappukanaran was sitting on the veranda leaning on a pillar. Patting

his shirtless shoulder, Thangal said "You can marry again". Without waiting to hear Bappu Kanaran's heart rending cries, Thangal moved on.

Outside it was quite bright. Blowing out the flame of the lantern Thangal said,; "From now on we can't rest. This will begin to spread, it will visit every house and kill a lot of people".

"Who?" Buhari couldn't comprehend him. He had no clue to what had happened to Pokki.

"It's an outbreak of Cholera".

"Yes, sir".

"A cholera epidemic".

Buhari suddenly thought of Pokki, "What happened to Pokki?"

"She died" replied Thangal glaring at him for a while then he continued. "This is going to spread rapidly. We have a lot of work to do".

"Call the Mussaliar" said Buhari.

"Why?"

"To prepare amulets"

"Pha-useless dog". Thangal snorted then his anger died down.

Bappu Kanaran had the grave dug in his own land. His neighbors Onakkan and Pokkan prepared the grave using a spade a shovel, taking turns they dug a six foot grave. Then a few others lowered Pooki's body draped in silk into the grave. Thereafter they covered it with soil; through out all this Bappukanaran sat on his veranda with his head slumped in his hands.

The day after Pokki died her next door neighbour Chamakandi Kunjuraman, his wife and their two children died leaving only two year old toddler behind.

No one dared to go into a house affected with cholera. Such houses were automatically quarantined; sons escaped from dying fathers, spouses ran away, and in every house the sick were left alone. With parched throat, wallowing in their own excreta, the sick waited for their end. No one came to moisten their dried up lips. They had neither friends or relatives to attend to them. Only

then did the villages understand the horrible nature of this fatal epidemic.

Yet Thangal went from house to house rescuing the dead, cold bodies from dirt, and pouring gallons of water down parched throats. Picking every tender coconut on the tree he treated the sick with saline water and tender coconut.

Spreading its hood of poison cholera hissed and played out its dance of death and destruction in every house. Every day new graves were dug, funeral prayers were lit and head-stones were laid.

Day and night Pookoya Thangal nursed the sick. Giving them medicine and water he sustained the life of the ones who were likely to improve and buried the dead ones.

One morning he woke up at the sound of a lot of noise coming from the masjid grounds. Some one had hung himself from the rain tree. When he was on his way to the mosque, Suhabi Thyar Saidali had heard the rumble of trouble.

Since it was still dark people couldn't recognize the victim. But more and more people gathered under the tree. All eyes were glued to the top. Anxious to know the identity of the person, they waited for light, smoking and talking about death and suicide.

As dawn was breaking in the east Buhari recognised the victim first. Staring at the body as if it were a crow with a ripe mango dangling from its beak, Buhari shouted.

"Bappukanaran?" By now the day was bright. Pookoya Thangal stood under the tree and looked up, Kanaran had only a loin cloth around him. His eyes were shut and saliva was still dripping from the corner of his mouth. His neck looked a little crooked and the head turned to a side he had used the rope with which his deceased wife had for years drawn water from the well, to hang himself. That old rope hadn't even frayed........death was that inevitable.

The shocking news spread like wild fire in the village. The women folk in Arakkal house trembled in fear. Bappukanaran whom they had seen just yesterday had killed himself!

Pookunjibi was shocked; once before she had heard about a hanging, something that had happened far away in Calicut.

Moreover it was what lawyer Kunju Raman had narrated to thangal, so that story didn't affect her so much, but Bappu Kanaran's suicide horrified her.

She started off to school holding onto Kunjali. When they set foot in the mosque ground, she began to shiver. They had to walk past the rain tree. Robot-like they moved forward. When they reached the tree they saw some fifteen people still standing under it.

They were all looking up and talking in hushed tones. Pookunji saw the dark stout Adhikari Kunjappan Nambiar in the group: Holding Kunjali tight she walked forward with great determination not to look up. But when she reached the rain tree, she couldn't helping looking up.

Bappukanaran was hanging at the end of one foot long rope with his head bent, slightly, at an angle.

In the night, at midnight, Pookunjibi screamed in her sleep. Every time she closed her eye she saw Bappukanaran hanging from a rope. Hearing her cry Pathu asked.

"What is wrong, Kunjabi?"

When Pookunji said, "I am scared", Pathu hugged her tight.

30

It was the day of graduation in school. Kunjali was up before dawn. He looked out through the small window. In the sky the morning star was shining.

Suddenly he heard Eramullan's call for prayer. But something about it was different; it sounded so meek and brittle, thought Kunjali. Now he could hear the horse moving about in the stable. Thangaluppappa must be getting ready for his morning ride. He was very particular about it, to him it was as important as his midday meal. Kunjali stayed in bed for a long time; all along he was thinking of the special day. When he heard the crows cry, he got up. The morning was bright. Downstairs the bustle had already started. He could hear a lot of noise from the kitchen and the bathroom. Now a

days he slept in a room upstairs. When Pookunjibi started to sleep with Pathumma, Thangaluppappa had shifted him to this room. Here he slept alone. Once in a while Hydrose slept on the floor to keep him company.

Kunjali went to the mango tree with the musak in his hand; that is where he brushed his teeth.

Hearing the sound of the hooves at the gate he turned. Thangaluppappa went in, changed his clothes and came out again he had a Western musak with something like a banana flower at the tip of it. He started to brush and within minutes, his mouth was full of foam. Then he coughed and spat and cleaned his tongue. The deafening sounds he made chased all the crows form the nearby mango tree. Pouring out the water from a bronze pipette into his cupped hand he washed his face with a 'dhum, dhum' sound. When he was about to go in, shaking his brush to get rid of the water from its bristles he asked:

"Are you day-dreaming, Kunjali?" Feeling shy Kunjali did not answer, he just spat the spittle out.

"Don't you have school today?"

"Today is our graduation"

"Very good!"

Saying that Thangal went in. Kunjali watched his belly wiggling; not just the belly, every part of Thangal's body was quivering, even his beard.

Not having anything special to do, Kunjali walked around the garden. Buhari was watering the plants. When he worked as a gardener a pair of trousers and a vest was his outfit. When dressed in those he became very serious. After all there were only three other people who wore pants in that village. One was Gabriel the station master the second one was the school inspector and the third-Pookoya Thangal.

Buhari's pants were made by cutting up one of Thangal's old pants into an exact half.

The garden was full of flowers. Kunjali picked one, removed the stem and sucked the liquid in. It was sweet nectar. Bumble bees

were humming every where and the garden shimmered in the morning light.

When Pookunjibi came into the garden, she smiled happily showing her shiny white teeth. There was a tinge of blood on her upper lip. Pathumma had brushed and scrubbed her very hard. She spat out the salt taste in her mouth it fell on a flower and the white flower turned red.

"Come here!"

Sitting on his big chair Thangaluppappa called them. They ran to him racing with each other. When they reached him they stood on either side of his chair. Pookoya Thangal took two silver coins and gave one to each.

"Dakshina for the graduation" Laughing merrily the happy children ran inside where Pathumma was waiting for them with their breakfast.

They sat down to eat. There was pathiri made in ghee, pomfret stew and two cups of a steaming rich tea. Kunjali didn't feel hungry at all. He was dreaming of Mussaliar's happy face at the sight of the silver coins.

Then seeing her mother go by Pookunji called out to her.

"Look, ma!" she said showing her the silver coin.

"Who gave this to you?" asked Attabi, half closing her suruma lined eyes.

"Uppappa"

"What for?"

"Today is the graduation" Kunjali closed his fist tight, Attabi caught it saying.

"Let me see"

Seeing a full silver coin in his palm, her eyes blazed in anger and her whole body trembled.

"A rupee for you too?" She grabbed the coin from him and ran in. After a while she came back with a quarter of a rupee and threw it on him.

"This is enough for you. The same amount for both, is it? That can't be, I will never let it" She said still trembling.

Pathu consoled the crying Kunjali. Pookunji washed her hands and went in.

Kunjali didn't touch his food. His stomach was empty but his eyes were filled with tears. Pathumma said:

"Son, you are only a poor boy in a rich house". Then she took him to the bathroom to wash.

By the time he reached the school, Kunjali's sorrow had cooled; children were playing everywhere. All dressed in new clothes. Fine cotton shirt, small dhoti, with a nice border and a silk scarf completed the boys attire. While the girls had veils decorated with zari to cover their long black hair. They had khojathi suruma in their eyes, muslims tops, silk wrap-arounds and attar on their clothes. When they walked, they lifted their trailing dress revealing the henna on the toes and finger tips.

Screaming and shouting, clapping and running they pranced around the whole school. Then porter with a basket on his head and Moosa Mussaliar appeared near the rail. Quickly they crossed the track to reach the mud path. Mussaliar came in first. He had forgotten to unfold his mundu. The children stared at his fat calves covered with curly hair. Usually he never forgot to pull down his mundu. Now suddenly releasing his oversight he slipped the fold down. Then he turned around and saw the Cheruman trying hard to get the big basket in through the small door.

He yelled for Maniyoor Abubaker. He was the biggest and the strongest kid in the school, also the dumbest. Generally he was entrusted with all small tasks around the school. Now the three of them together pulled and pushed and got the basket in. The big basket was put on Shankara Kurup master's table. It was covered with a white cloth; ghee was dripping from the bottom and the children were eager to see what it contained.

A big fly came in from some where and began to fly around the basket. Moosa Mussaliar sat on his chair and fanned himself cold. He scratched his head and wiped his face and shouted.

"Recite your lines, you dogs".

The children began to recite the Koran. Nonstop they warbled for long. Then the Moosa took out his pen and ink bottle. Looking at the kid sitting at the end of the row he called.

"Come on"

One by one they moved towards him. He untied the silk scarf to receive the quarter of a rupee from them. At the sight of each four anna coin he shouted a 'Besh' in approval. Then he took the writing instrument, dripped it in ink and wrote on the palm of their hand.

When Pookunji went to the Mussaliar, Kunjali's heart began to beat faster. His turn was next. Pookunji had a full rupee, what he had was a mere one fourth of it. Spying the silver in her hand Mussaliar stroked her face tenderly, then he deposited the money in his pocket. He wrote not only on her palm but drew a nice design on her forehead too. Then pointing to Kunjali, he shouted.

"Come"

Kunjali moved on wobbly legs; when he stood near the wooden table he was shivering. Mussaliar held him close. Inspite of his own sweat and a great anxiety, Kunjali could smell the strong whiff of the master's perspiration. Drumming the table with his rough hands, he said 'Keep' dreaming of another full silver coin.

Kunjali opened the hand-kerchief very slowly and put out his four anna on the table. Mussaliar's forehead creased in a frown and his lips curled up; muttering under his breath he began to write on Kunjali's palm. The bamboo-stick ploughed into his soft hands. When he finished writing the Mussaliar said like a curse.

"Bastard"

The word resounded in his head not once but a thousand times. Some how he managed to get back to his seat. What followed was all a blank.

It was a big clamour that woke him up. The distribution of sweets had just begun. The rush started when they removed the white cloth over the basket. Kunjali didn't know when the writing had stopped. One by one the children came out holding the sweet in their hands.

Kunjali didn't go for his share. The words of the Koran written on the palm had to be first shown to the sky then to the water and then lapped up by tongue. But when he reached home Kunjali rubbed his hand on the sand in the yard and spoiled the writing thoroughly.

31

Summer had just started, yet the sultry heat was unbearable. Ominous black clouds cast large shadows on the moonlight. Every leaf on every tree stood still without even a hint of a breeze.

Eramullan couldn't sleep; the humid heat was annoying. Actually it was not even very hot, just itchy and prickly. At first he only removed his shirt then discarding rest, he sat on the cool steps leading to the mosque. But when the burning sensation continued he went to the tank and drenched himself with the water in it.

Later lying on a wet mat he looked out the window; there was not a single star in sight. The sky seemed as dull as a gunny sack. Slowly he slipped into a senseless slumber. But when he woke up his mind was clear. It was close to morning and the eastern sky was bright with the dawn light.

Since the tank was filled with water he didn't have to bother about that work. After brushing his teeth, while cleaning his tongue he tried to clear his throat for a long time. He still felt as if a lump was stuck there. Was it phlegm or some kind of swelling? How ever much tried to get it out, the obstruction seemed to roll around in the same place. Turning west he put his fingers into his ears, then he got the shock of his life.

"Allahu Akbar; Allahu Akbar"

Though he bellowed it out as loud as he could there was no sound what so ever coming out of his throat. The voice that usually boomed through the air came more like a murmur of a wind today. Murmur or not, he finished the call and slumped on the mat like a dud fire cracker; after a while he felt like lying down. So he stretched himself on the mat. Then Thundil Ibrahim came in.

"Looks like you are still asleep, should I come to call out the adhan?"

"Get lost you devil" is what he wanted to yell but again no sound came out of him.

"Why are you staring like an owl?" Ibrahim tried to crack a joke.

"Not well" said Eramullan.

But what came out was little drought of air; Ibrahim couldn't make out a word of it. So he asked again "Not well" still the answer was an inaudible whisper but this time, Ibrahim understood. After his prayers he went straight to Arakkal house, where Thangal was getting ready for his morning ride.

"What is it, Ibrahim?" he asked.

"Eramullan is sick".

"I see. Then we'll get Komappa Vaidyar".

"His voice is gone. He cannot utter a word".

"That's alright, there is treatment for these ailments"

"But what about the call for prayer......"

Suddenly Thangal realised the gravity of the situation. "We'll appoint another person"

Eramullan continued to lie down. His body was aching all over, even his bones hurt. When he tried to sit up he felt dizzy and when he tried to sleep his joints seemed to scrunch into an agonising pain. He wasn't hungry at all, but his throat was dry, and he felt very thirsty.

In a short while Thundil Ibrahim came back with a plateful food and tea. With great reluctance Eramullan sat up. A glass full of tea was kept on the window next to it was a plate covered with another plate. He lifted the lid, the plate was filled with pounded rice and grated coconut. Putting the lid back, he took a few sips.

"This rice is really good and the coconut is sweet" Ibrahim.

"I'm not hungry. I don't want any".

Then Thundil Ibrahim separated the plates again. He looked at the tempting coconut flakes spread on top of the pounded rice and

mixed them well. His hand was moist with ghee. As he dropped the first ball into his mouth he said.

"Very sweet coconut"

He cleaned the plate in a jiffy and drank as much water as a bullock would and then belched.

"What happened to you, Eramullan?"

"My throat, it hurts" he said with difficulty. Before noon Komappa Vaidyar was at Arakkal house sticking his stiff palm leaf umbrella into the sand. He asked for Eramullan. Eramullan came slowly to the veranda. He sat down.

"Take off your vest"

The Vaidyar gently drummed his fingers on the bony chest. It produced a hollow sound. Then he examined Eramullan's neck and lower jaw, he massaged his stomach, checked his pulse, his tongue and finger tips and said.

"You may get up now"

Eramullan got up, Komappa Vaidyar washed his hands, wiped them on his upper garment and moved closer to Thangal. When Thangal looked at him anxiously, the Vaidyar said:

"You have to get some one else to call for prayer. It is not right to trouble him anymore".

The Vaidyar was sad, he sat silent for a long time. Thangal sat up on his huge chair, planting his feet firm on the floor he asked.

"What is wrong with him?"

"He can't be cured" replied Vaidyar with pity.

Hiding his growing anxiety Thangal persisted.

"What's his malady?"

Throwing his hands up in the air the Vaidyar said, "What can I say? It is a maligment growth"

"Yes," continued the Vaidyar. "It is what they call cancer in English"

Thangal got up from his chair drawing the curtain aside, he

looked in and called out.

"Dai.....Hydrose"

The servant boy came running.

"Is it time to bring food?" he asked. The only thought that occupied his mind was that of transporting food from the kitchen to the front.

"No, you fool!" shouted Thangal. Then grabbing him on the neck he instructed.

"From today onwards serve Eramullan and Buhari separately in different plates."

Hearing all this Komappa Vaidyar said,

"Pardon me. But cancer is not contagious"

Picking up his umbrella he bade goodbye to Thangal. Thangal tried to pay him a silver coin but he recoiled from it as if from a burning bush.

"No thank you. No fees for futile treatment"

Komappa Vaidyar went down the steps and Buhari watched the back of his umbrella till he disappeared in a distance.

That night when every one left the house after supper, the servant boy brought two bowls of kanji. The curry was served in two different plates too. Though he kept the dishes together Buhari who reached there first pulled them apart and kept it half a yard away.

Buhari guzzled down the kanji with the aid of wooden spoon and stuffed his mouth with curry. Then he licked each of his fingers clean. Sagging like a bale of cotton Eramullan sat far away. He wasn't hungry. Komappa Vaidyar didn't tell him what his illness was; he hadn't even given him a prescription. What could be wrong with him? He wondered. What was this stuff choking in his throat?

He looked at Thangal reclining on his big chair. He was puffing his Singapore cigar and staring hard at the sky.

"Why aren't you eating?"

"I am not hungry. I don't want any".

Buhari stared longingly at the plate full of food. He could easily gobble it up. But he didn't dare take any from Eramullan, the thought of his terrible illness had effectively killed the pangs of hunger in Buhari.

Thangal finished smoking his cigar and got up from his groaning chair, then Buhari putting out the light asked loudly.

"Don't you want to go, Eramullan?"

But Eramullan was too worn out to talk or walk, he slumped down like a wilted leaf on the wall. Buhari gently lifted him; he was very light, carrying him like a little lamb in both his hands he laid Eramullan on a mat.

He closed the gate. Just before dawn Eramullan woke up. He realised he was not in the mosque. After becoming a Mukri he had never slept anywhere else in his life except in the mosque.

Though still tired, he mustered enough strength to sit up. He should get up and walk to the mosque and call for prayer. I cannot live in this world without performing my work.....when his thoughts reached this point he heard,

"Allahu ....Akbar......."

Eramullan was thoroughly startled; a new voice from the mosque! He was shocked. He couldn't believe his own ears. A new voice of adhan in his absence?

He ran to the gate and tried to open it. Then Buhari puffing his beedi in a corner asked, "So you are cured, are you?"

Eramullan didn't know what to say. He was nervous and edgy. Gathering all his strength to utter just one word he managed to say.

"Open".

Buhari snuffed out the butt on the floor, turned towards the wall and said "You go back to sleep Eramullan. It's the new Mukri you heard and not the devil!"

A new Muezzin in the mosque! Someone new in charge! As realisation dawned on him, Eramullan crumpled to the floor.

32

When the train stopped at the station three people got down at Karakkad that day. One of them was Thiampuran's overseer, Rairu Nair. He was returning from Calicut after his visit to the white Sahib. His face clearly reflecting the seriousness of his mission, he walked out with a bag full of records of land dealings. What the bag held was the geography of the entire village.

Station master Gabriel collected the ticket from Rairu Nair and looked at him with great admiration. It was a yellow a second class ticket. The first yellow ticket to fall into his hands since he became a station master at Karakkad railway station. Carefully he stuffed it into the back a pocket of his pants. This day should be recorded in golden letters in the history of the village, he thought. By then Rairu Nair was already seated in the carriage and the two horses took off, raising a cloud of dust in the air.

The other two passengers did not come out through the iron gate exit, instead they began to walk along the railway track one to the north and the other to the south. Gabriel clapped his hand to call for porter Chandu and clerk Raman and ordered them to attach the two fellows. The shoeless men in their khaki uniform ran fast and caught the culprits in a minute.

One was a swamy, the other one was a Khaleefa. By now the customers from Kannan the nine and half's tea stall had crowded at the gate. The swamy looked filthy in his stinking robes; his matted hair was a dirty brown and his face a stoic. The feet that took him on the road to renunciation were covered in mud.

"Where is your ticket?" thundered Gabriel.

The swamy didn't open his mouth. His lips were shut in straight, narrow line as if sealed from birth. But his eyes spoke volumes. The flames of ire and anger burning in them silenced Gabriel. Looking into those fiery eyes, he fell flat on the platform, unconscious.

"Wow" said the crowd behind the gate. He closed gates opened and the Swamiji lowered his eyes. He came out of the gate followed by the Khaleefa. As the crowd watched them in wonder, some one said.

"Holy men"

"Maha Maya" said another.

But the avid newspaper addict Mundodi Kannan said "They are neither. Son of a bitch, they most be spies who have come to dig up our secrets"

After that, without another word he walked back to Mancheeyam. The Khaleefa went straight to Arakkal house. There Kunjali and Pookunji were standing under the vilimbi tree. Holding hands, they were looking at the flowers. The Khaleefa cleared his throat and spat out loud hearing him the children let go off their hands.

"Any offering for Nahoor? Does anyone wish for favors from Nahoor?" with that introduction Khaleefa kept his silver box on the veranda and spread out a piece of cloth. As the cloth rolled open some pictures became half visible on it.

"Any offering for Nahoor? Contributions?" he asked again.

"Yes please", cried a plaintive voice from inside.

Immediately the Khaleefa unraveled the rest of the roll. First came the picture of a Musak, then a plant and a tree. The tree was full of fruits, underneath it stood a number of hungry people. The khaleefa started with the story of the brush. It had fallen of Mohammed Nabi's hand. But it was not destroyed, instead it grew into a tree fully laden with fruits. The poor come to pick it. Eating those fruits their thunder and thirst disappeared. Even his lowly tooth brush was like a horn of plenty!

A tired Khaleefa finished the story, folded the cloth, wiped his forehead and sat back on the varanda. Then Hydrose the boy appeared with food. Staring at him with anger in his beady eyes and without a word he placed the bowl and plate in front of the Kahaleefa and withdraw in to the house. He moved like a puppet on a string, his base was the kitchen the center from where his actions were controlled.

The big bowl of kanji and curry got eaten up in fifteen minutes. The Khaleefa sat content with a toothpick between his teeth. Then he heard the bangles moving behind the curtain.

"Is there any offering?"

As if in answer a hand stretched through the curtains with the replica of a part of the body made in silver.

These offerings to Nahoor are especially made for the blessings of begetting a child. The replica indicates the sex of the child, the devotees desires.

Kahaleefa received it very piously in his long fingers and deposited it in his box. Actually these contributions that he collected from house to house never reached Nahoor. It never even reached his own home; his insatiable appetite consumed it immediately.

The Khaleefa went down the steps with his box in his hand. From under the tree Pookunjibi and Kunjali watched the man flitting like a bee from house to house in search of contributions.

Meanwhile the swamy was busy performing miracles. From the station he directed himself to a carpenter's house in Muttungal. The carpenter was not at home. He was busy building a house for a muslim returned from Singapore. And the carpenter's wife had gone to fetch water from the valley, a long way off the house. The only one left in the house was the old, sick and paralysed mother. The Swamy waled into the house; the fetid odour of unwashed clothes pierced the old woman's nostrils. The the old woman who hadn't spoken for years asked.

"Who is it?"

The Swamy didn't speak even in that soft darkness his lips stayed sealed. The silent swamy seeing all massaged the patient from head to toe, not once but thrice. With that the woman became alert, her eyes opened wide and the right side of the body, immobile for years came alive. A feeling of animation started in her head and it travelled down to her big toes. She felt like getting up.

Just then the daughter-in-law walked in from the kitchen to check on the mother. Seeing the Swamy in the room. She jumped out shouting, "Thief! Thief!"

Hearing the commotion the neighbors came running. The woman was standing out in the yard panting. Every one pestered her with questions. Her eyes bulging with fear, she replied.

"Thief"

"Where?"

"In there"

All the men, the fat ones, the armed ones, every one stood around, discussing the different aspects of the situation. No one dared to go in.

Then something stirred in the house. Some one talked and two figures emerged out of the house first came the Swamy and behind him with folded hands the carpenter's mother. The woman, who couldn't even stand up for years, was walking behind him!

With that miracle the Swamy became famous in the village. He was a holy man, a saint.

On the same evening some young men were playing foot ball in the open field and few others were watching them. When the Swamy came in no one noticed the Brahamachary with a stinky robe and crust covered eyes. But when a ball flew out of the court, something curious happened. The swamy stopped the ball first and then gave it a full blooded kick. The ball flew past the goals and landed on the ground.

While the swamy scored the ball goal, a lot of people gathered aroundhim all staring in admiration. They drowned him with questions, but the Swamy spoke only English and a little Kannada too.

The stories about the swamy spread everywhere. It seems he was the son of a rich man in Mangalore. When he was studying for his BA honors in St.Alosius college he fell in love. When he was jilted he ended up with a broken heart and became a nut. This was one of the versions. But others insisted on the transformation of the jilted lover into a seer. Whatever the reason he left the college for the life of a wanderer. When in college he was a good athlete. Foot ball and High jump were his favorite items, that is why he had such long legs. After leaving the college he sat cooped up in his room for a while. Once he became an ascetic, he travelled all over the world in one of his sojourns he landed in Karakkad.

The carpenter's house continued to be his home stead. Most nights he would reach there only after midnight. By then every one in the house would be fast asleep. His kanji and chutney was left in the varandá; twice or thrice in a week he would eat his supper; on other days it turned stale by morning. Once when he hadn't

eaten anything for five nights in a row the carpenter's wife didn't leave him any food outside. That night all hell broke loose. The Swamy dragged the sleeping woman from inside the house and thoroughly beat her up. Even though she was bleeding from the wounds, she didn't utter a harsh word or a curse against him; patiently suffering all the indignities she washed her wound and dressed with a little herbal medicine. Then looking up with folded hands she prayed,

"Maha Maya!"

The Swamy became a regular at the football field. Some days he just watched the game, other days he rescued a runaway ball and kicked it hard. One day he came into the court. The players were shocked. The game stopped; the sweating players in their shorts milled around the swamy. The swamy stared at each player for a long time. A searing look. Then he grabbed a fellow and pushed him out of the court and barked.

"Start the play"

Soon the game was in full swing. The players were excited.The Swamy joined the side from which the player was sent out. He didn't allow even one ball to go past him. After a while the Swamy raced ahead with the ball. Dodging every player in the game he reached the goal keeper but he didn't kick the ball. After standing still for a while with the ball, he went back to his side. No one could stop the Swamy. Tearing past the goal of his own side, he kicked a brilliant goal for the opposite side. No one cheered. The court was silent. The players gawked at him in utter disbelief.

Smiling at the bewildered goal keeper the Swamy mimicked the futility of it all in a gesture. Then casually walking out of the court he went straight ahead in the direction of the carpenter's house.

33

Police firing in Onjeeyam. The Madras police forced the revolutionaries into the narrow ridge between the two hills and splattered them with bullets. Down in the valley there were pools of blood - the blood of the brave man. Some died. Many fell, wounded. The rest were terrorised into fleeing. Six or seven police vans were parked on the banks of the paddy fields beneath the hill. Even after dusk fell the police didn't come back to their vehicles. They were searching from house to house, looking for comrades-men and women.

It was the ever-ready Saidali who came bolting through the gate to the front of the garden; he couldn't get even a word out. Only spittle and foam came out of his mouth. As the fellow gasped for air his chest and his back seemed to be touching each other. When he reached Arakkal house, they were getting ready for a music concert. Military Ibrahim sat on the floor getting his harmonium ready for the event. He was surrounded by a few listeners with empty stomachs. They were more interested in the pathiri and chicken curry that was to follow the concert. Valia Thangal sat in his big chair.

Baffled by the expression on ever ready Saidali's face Thangal rose from his chair. Saidali was known for his ability to remain unfazed no matter what the occasion. He was always ready for action be it to beat a mad dog to death, or to strike a cobra swaying to attack, or to save a drowning child, rescuing people form burning houses, dragging out people who attempted suicide by jumping into deep wells; all these heroic deeds were just part of every day life for Saidali. As the man was always ready for anything the villagers nick-named him the ever-ready-Saidali.

Now seeing the anxious look on his face, Thangal went up to him and asked.

"What's it Saidali? What happened?"

"The M.S.P is firing in Onjeeyam. Some people are dead"

"Calm down and talk clearly Saidali" said Thangal climbing down the steps. He could see that something was terribly wrong or Saidali wouldn't be this upset.

"Who died? Who got shot? Don't be afraid".

"Many revolutionaries have been shot dead. Police and M.S.P. are hunting for the rest. It is going to be wild. They will round up every one".

Hearing this account Thangal was lost in thought for a while. Everyone around him was quiet. They could hear the distant barrage of gun shots. Finally Thangal said.

"All of you get up and hurry home. The times are bad."

Fear filling their hearts the fellows who had come for music and food scurried home. Buhari was smoking his beedi at the gate. The last man to go called out to him.

"Lock the gate, you fool."

"What for?" asked Buhari staring at him in disbelief the man said.

"Trouble! There is some uprising going on in the village"

Stamping his beedi on the ground Buhari said.

"Pha! The trouble is in your head. Get lost, you devil".

The moment he left the place, Buhari shuddering in cold fear, locked up everything.

At night Thangal sat alone for his dinner. The masala chicken, ghee fried Pathiri and the porridge smothered in cream of coconut could not titillate his taste buds. He just couldn't bring himself to eat alone.

His heart roaming through the hills and dales of Onjeeyam Thangal shuddered to think of the problems ahead.

With a glass of cold water Thangal put an end to his dinner.

"Enough"

Hydrose the servant boy sprang to the front. There was no trace of any worry on his face. For once the mongolian face looked happy. The plates full of food gave him immense pleasure; taking them back to the kitchen was an usual experience for him. Very satisfying indeed! Hydrose enjoyed the situation thoroughly. At least one day the Tharavad had escaped from the greedy free-loaders. The fellows

who came there to eat seemed to have nothing but a stomach in them. They never seemed to think that all this food cost Thangal his money and the kitchen maids a lot of labour. Let their stomachs burn in hell fire, he cursed as he put the last plate down.

That night there was a feast in the kitchen. Kuraisipathu served everyone liberally, the sumptuousness of the forecourt had finally reached the kitchen for dinner many licked their fingers clean, some burped and not a servant washed the dishes. The lavish meal made the maids sluggish and soon they were snoring on their torn mats, sleeping with soot stained faces.

They never heard the gun shots booming in the distance, on the hills of Onjeeyam but Kunjali was listening to it carefully. He had lost his sleep; turning this way and that he lay awake all night.

All day long they had heard frightening rumors about the uprising. It seems that the Communists were behind it all; they were planning to loot a few rich houses. Adhikari Kunjunni Nair's house, Thalakkal Pooker's house and Arakkal Tharavad were their targets. Their plan was to loot the house and kill the heads of the families as a sign of warning.

Now the announcer standing in front of the group cried aloud.

"A curfew has been imposed for three days in this village! No one should get out or loiter around. Every one should shut the door and stay inside. Even smoke should not be seen escaping out of your chimneys!"

The orders were obviously very stern.

Adhikari Kunjunni Nair didn't even look at Thangal. His face was very grave and puffed up. It was the face of a serious man burdened by the responsibility of a stricken village.

It was a lonely day. Even postman Rairu Nair's bells were silent. Fisherman Kunjahammad didn't call out his ware. The wheels on the bullock cart didn't go round and round and Kannan the nine and half's tea stall was closed. Not a soul stirred out of the house. The only person who moved around was station master Gabriel. He too made his appearance only twice. Once when the train went south and the other time when it stopped to go north.

It was only three days but in the village it felt like three years.

On the fourth day the curfew was lifted. Kannan the nine and half's, tea stall was reopened.

Ever-ready-Saidali came running to the house. Thangal was at his usual post, reclining on his chair. As he came in Saidali reported the sad news.

"They have caught Mundodi Kannan"

"Who?"

"The police"

"What is strange about that?"

What was strange about the incident was that all the trouble had started with the arrest of Kannan. The police locked him up in jail and his comrades started an agitation to get him released. Then the Madras police shot them and Kannan was safely put away in Badakara. In the mean time head constable, biryani Gopalan Nair, went into Tajmahal hotel and ate four plates of biryani in one sitting and came back to the cell where Kannan was 'locked up'.

"How fares your revolution, you son of a dog?"

"Victory to the revolution!", cried the indomitable Kannan.

"Pha!" The expression of disgust was made effective with a few hard kicks. The wall of the cell was splashed with blood and the floor was covered with bloody urine. Soon the over stuffed tormenter was worn out. But Kannan kept up his 'Zindabad'

Wiping his forehead the head constable commented.

"You are a true communist"

Gopalan locked Kannan up and slumped on his chair. Dipping his finger in the blood streaming down his head Kannan drew a picture on the wall. The sign of revolution!

Kannan the comrade didn't die. In spite of all the tortures he lived. Though he vomited blood he was alive. But did anyone guess at that time the same Kannan was not going to live for more than a year?

A care-worn Thangal stretched on his chair. He called aloud for 'water'. Hydorse was standing behind the curtain waiting for orders.

34

Buhari closed the door, lowered the flame of the lamp and stretched himself on the bed: With a beedi still glowing on his lips when he was enjoying the last puff his mouth tasted bitter. Then Buhari remembered Thangal asking him to stop smoking. I should stop this, he thought. Thangal even used to joke about starting a small scale beedi manufacturing industry at the gate just to keep up his demand.

As he was stubbing in out, he heard someone knocking at the door.

"Who is there?"

The knocking continued.

"Who the hell is there?"

Buhari was getting angry. Then he heard the person outside crying. The sound seemed familiar. Buhari opened the door.

It was Andraman.

Buhari turned the flame brighter. In the dim light of the kerosene lamp he saw a bag of skin and bones sitting on the floor and massaging his legs. Buhari couldn't see his face. But he saw the whip marks on Andraman's swollen legs. In one place it was infected and pus and water were oozing out of the wound opening. Actually it was more water. His feet were bloated out of shape.

When Andraman's face became visible in the dim light, the terrible sense of loss in him seemed to cover him like a dark could. He couldn't even drop a tear for it was all shed for his long-lost horse.

"Where did you fall?" asked Buhari.

"I didn't fall. The police whipped me" stammered Andraman with difficulty.

"Why?"

Andraman went on with his story. He was walking around looking for his horse. Finally one day he reached the hills of

Onjeeyam. He didn't know anything about the uprising. But a policeman pounced on him with a question.

"Where are you going? You spy?"

Andraman tried to reply, fear made him stammer and the police accused him of imitating his leader and raised the lathi.

"Why did you come here in the middle of the night?"

"To look for my horse"

"Phoo! Dog! Looking for a horse are you? Liar!" with that he brought down his weapon hard and Andraman's legs were reduced to this pulp.

When Buhari washed Andraman's feet with cold water he writhed in pain. The two of them walked towards the kitchen. Their twisted shadows danced on the sand-draped yard.

"Pathu.......Pathu" Buhari called, knocking at the door. After a while they heard the jingle of glass bangles and the sound of wooden sandals. As she took off the bolt, she asked,

"Who is it?"

"It's me - Buhari"

"I know that" she said. "I know your voice. But who is with you?

"Open the door"

"I don't understand"

"Open the door. Then you'll see".

Pathumma opened the door. In the light of the lamp she saw Andraman. Her eyes travelled from his head to his feet, it sadly lingered on his swollen legs.

"Is there anything to eat?" asked Buhari.

Pathumma went in and made a lot of noise in the kitchen. The she came to call them.

"Come in....."

She had arranged two wooden seats, facing each other. There were two bowls of kanji a few pathiris, vegetable curry and little fish. Instead of chunks of fish there were only a few leaves and

some green chillis. Andraman wasn't hungry. He just spooned the kanji water into his mouth and once in a while licked his finger dipping in the fish curry.

Pathumma stood gazing at her husband. Her eyes were burning with tears. Andraman never looked up to see her face.

Buhari finished his food and looked at Andraman's plate. Thangal had always said that he had two stomachs one to digest his food; the other to store the stuff for later.

"Don't go away again. Stay here" said Pathu

"Hm," grunted Andraman

Buhari spread a second mat at the gate house and said.

"Come, you sleep here".

He handed him one old sheet to cover himself, smoked another beedi and wondered what to do.

After a while Andraman got up.

"Open the door"

Buhari increased the light. That was always the first action when he heard a sound at night.

"Why?"

"I want to go"

"Where?"

"My horse......"

Buhari didn't ask him anything more, in an instant he opened the door. And Andraman disappeared in the darkness along with the fire flies. Buhari dreamt of two swollen feet growing bigger and bigger caught in a perpetual search. He didn't see them in his sleep but in his active mind. Just before morning, Buhari heard Pathu moving around. He raised the wick.

"Yes? What is up?

"Where is he?"

"He went away".

"Where to?"

"In search of his horse"

Then he began to tease her.

"After all you didn't give him a son for him to go in search of you missy"

Pathu was heart broken she hadn't even had a chance to see him properly. Buhari lowered the flame. Pathumma went back and Buhari called after her.

"Your womb is dumb"

Kunjali was up early in the morning. The front door was wide open. When he came out, the ground was damp with the morning mist. The clear impression of police boots on the sand made him shiver in fear. Was the MSP in the house last night? If Pookunji were to see these footprints what would happen to her? Wouldn't she faint in fear? With his bare feet he began to sip away the foot print from the dirt. Every one in the house was given water in the bathroom-bucket full of water. But no one filled Kunjali's bath under the strict vigilance of Attabi, the bastard was deprived of such luxuries. He was to grow up like a servant; she didn't want to spoil him with comforts. She was sill smarting from the old humiliation of having fed him her breast milk. She should never have given in. It just happened at a weak moment in her life, that too under the immense pressure from her husband.

She had stopped feeding him when he was barely six months old. But when he got another chance after a couple of months, the pig had drained her dry.

This is how it had happened. Pookunjibi came down with a terrible case of diarrhea and vomiting. The Vaidyar banned milk from her diet. According to him medicine was as important as abstinence from milk. Within a few hours Attabi's breasts were painfully sore and swollen. It rocked her whole body and she began to shiver with fever. The Vaidyar advised to feed the other boy. The way he muttered the instructions told her enough. With great reluctance she brought the boy close to her bosom and he pounced on her nipples like a puppy. As soon as the pain disappeared she pulled him away but his ruby lips continued to suck. Even as a baby the bastard was very greedy.

Kunjali had heard Attabi telling this to someone. From then on

a little smoke began to wreath up in his hear. Every time he pulled up a bucket of water he said to himself. One day Pookunji will have to fill the bucket for me and from then on, she will be forced to do it everyday. After his bath, when he finished drying himself he looked at his palms. They were very red with rope marks. He ground his teeth and rubbed his hands together.

Soon he sat in the dark quarters of the house for his breakfast. He was fed, all the three times in this dark room. So even as a kid he realised the great friendship between the hand and the mouth. Pathumma brought two plates with puttu and egg curry. Kunjali began to eat and Attabi breezed in as usual and walked off with his tea. She inspected its contents in the kitchen light, scolded everyone for giving him too much milk and then poured it out. Kunjali drank some plain water he said to Pathumma

"Water is thicker than tea. Isn't it Pathumma?"

Pathu didn't reply; what could she say?

At the age of seven she was brought to that Tharavad. Her penniless father had seven children. He sent them all to different rich households to work as servants. That was the beginning of Pathu's life in Arakkal house. Her first job was to run small errands and to go to the store, but soon she began to take care of a lot other things. The kitchen the bathroom, garden and every other place fell under her domain. Even as a child she was smart and mature and could take care of anything; so when she grew up she was responsible for everything, even the emotional needs of the people in the house.

She was the undisputed queen in the kitchen. All the maids were under her and they teased her, calling her,

"Pookoya Thangal's personal property"

In the beginning she was happy and proud. This extra dash of salt spiced up her life. But the euphoria didn't last long. One day Dr. Alamelu operated on her. With that she felt she was put in her place.

35

That year the Ramadan started in the steaming heat of March. The Karakkad mosque was painted white, fourteen Theeyas were employed to drain the water in the well and to clean up the shipful of dirt. The Mukri and his son washed all the mats in the masjid. They cleared the ceiling and threw out the hornets with their nests, dropping a lot of mud in the process. Then finally they wiped away the spider webs both old and new. If Hussain Koya was alive he would cought the doves of nestling in the attic. He was an expert in rearing doves. But he was not alive. After suffering for a long time from TB, with fever and cough, he became a bag of bones, vomited blood and died. His grave was very close to the muhami. Even after twentyfive long years not a blade of grass grew on it. The TB germs that enslaved him in life were so deadly even after his death.

There was tremendous hustle and bustle in Arakkal Tharavad also. All the rooms in the house were washed and cleaned, the windows were painted, mirrors wiped and the carpets thoroughly walloped to rid them of their dust. Thangal trimmed his hair and beard and shaved his under arms clean. Buhari and Hydrose had their heads shaven smooth.

But the true grandeur of the advent of Ramadan was to be seen in the kitchen. Under the leadership of Kuraisi Pathu the maids worked day and night. The water in the well was half used up in the three days of cleaning.

Then one by one the tenants began to come. They were mostly residents, lease holders, occupant workers and binamies. Thangal stretched himself on his chair. Mulleri Kunhi Kannan and his daughter Naani were the first to come in with a bottle of ghee, a rooster and bunch of banana. It pleased Pookoya Thangal to see. Naani; though dark in complexion she was very beautiful. Kunhikannan lowered his load of bananas on the floor, removed his turban and tucked it under his arm. Naani also brought her basket down from her head. The new basket smelled of the river, it had a pot of ghee and a rooster with his legs tied in it. When Naani straightened up the cock crowed loud and clear.

That too pleased Thangal.

"The fellow is in a bind yet look at his pride. Where is the lease money?'

Kunjikannan took out three one rupee and gave it to Thangal. Then he retreated in reverence without turning his back to Thangal. Thangal's gaze strayed to the topless girl. He asked

"Who is this?"

"My daughter"

"She should be given clothes to wear. I'm very particular about women covering their bosom. Don't you know that?"

Getting up from his chair he called her.

"Come, I'll give you a blouse and mundu"

A frightened Naani moved to a corner like a wet hen. Kunhikannan said 'go'. She climbed on to veranda and then followed Thangal to reach the second floor. When they got into Thangal's room, she stood puzzled.

When she came down Naani was wearing a new red blouse and new mundu with a black border. She looked pale; she had her old mundu in her hand. She didn't take it home though. When they were crossing the bridge, she tossed it into the river, when her father was not looking.

Many more people came to the house with presents and poultry. The barrel of ghee was overflowing, the beams on the roof were about to collapse under the weight of the bananas. The roosters crowed so loud that the sky was about to fall. Thangal gifted fourteen women with new clothes, thirteen of them received it at the veranda and one, inside.

By evening Thangal was quite tired. After the evening prayer the Khaliyar from Badakara confirmed the beginning of Ramadan. Everyone was busy getting ready for supper. It had to be a dinner that would fortify them for the coming fast. Thangal had just one condition-who ever wanted dinner, had to take a ticket. Before the night prayer eighteen people took tickets from Buhari, another sixteen were invited so altogether there were going to be thirty four people for the meal before sunrise.

There was a roaring fire in the kitchen. All the pots and pans were sizzling and maids were sweating. The kitchen came alive on the first night of the Ramzan.

Before going to bed Kunjali had begged Pathumma to wake him up for the "dawn dinner"

"I want to keep roza"

Pathumma observed the fast diligently but how could she let Kunjali fast? Though he was not her flesh and blood, she thought of him as her own. It was not really a thought but more of a dream. Whatever the case may be she could not steel herself to wake the tired boy from his sleep.

Outside, the hall was very noisy. Everyone was washing and spitting. Then it became very quiet. All the thirty four people were busy eating. Their attempt was to help the stomach vanquish the pangs of hunger during the day by stuffing themselves at night.

When they heard the Adhan, they burped and got up with tooth pick between their teeth. They were ready for the prayers. While he was in the mosque Thangal spotted Eramullan. He was not inside but out in the gutter. After his prayer Thangal came out and went to Eramullan and called him. But he didn't move. Then Thangal touched him with his devout hands. He was cold.

Two or three people were made to carry him to the front of the house. Lanterns and petromexes were hung from the ceiling. On the veranda the night turned to day.

Thangal stopped down to have a good look at Eramullan.

There was no hint of life on his face. Instead of blood his veins seemed to be filled with some lifeless yellow fluid with poison in it. His body had shrivelled up like a piece of dried tobacco. The gnarled hands stuck out like pencils from the loose shirt sleeves. Thangal looked at his eyes. They remained closed. By now most of the crowd had dispersed. They had to sleep the day off. One by one the rest of the men went down the paths to their house. All heads covered and shaven disappeared.

Finally Thangal decided the course of action. " Let us take him to the doctor"

When doctor Thampan had just been appointed at the

government hospital, every one was singing the praise of his methods and his medicines. Next day in the morning Buhari and ever-ready-Saidali together laid Eramullan's half dead body into a stretcher. It was the property of Puthen purai Rama Kurup. Apart from him and few other dignitaries no one else was privileged to use it so far. But they could not reject Thangal's request. Within minutes the stretcher was brought to his house with four able bodied theeya stretcher bearers.

With an 'Omko' 'Omko' sound they began to move Buhari and ever-ready-Saidali followed. Every time Thangal's carriage came close to overtaking the sweating bearers, he didn't allow the horse to do so. The hospital was near the bus stand, beyond the fort grounds. The small hospital was filled with patients and there was just one doctor to take care of them. With a lot of arguing and pleading, they managed to get Eramullan's body on to the doctor's examining table.

The doctor was a dark stout man, his speech resemble the rattle of a few grains of sand in an empty tin can. As he talked, a white toothy smile flashed on his dark face. He had glasses on, its lenses were thick and the frame was very fat. His clothes clung to his body and the colour did not suit him in the least. Altogether Thangal got the impression that this fellow didn't fit into the atmosphere of a hospital in anyway.

But when he started talking to his patient a completely different face was revealed. His voice turned deep and tender. His hands soothing, like the ripples in a flowing river moved all over Eramullan. Looking at Pookoya Thangal the doctor asked.

"What's your connection with the patient?"

Sitting comfortably on a stool next tot he table thangal replied.

"I am Pookoya from Singapore. At present from Karakkad".

Thangal wanted to show off his proficiency in English.

"I know Malayalam. That is why I talk to you in that language".

Smiling affably Thangal got up from his seat and said.

"Dear doctor, I don't know any English, that is why I converse in that language. Pardon me"

Dr. Thampan shook hands with Thangal; holding the fair hand in his dark palm, he said

"Please sit down".

Thangal sat down. Pushing the fat spectacles firmly on his nose the doctor continues.

"Your patient is in a real bad way. I can only promise you to reduce his pain as long as he is alive"

"What is he suffering from?"

"Cancer, of course"

The doctor got up. When Buhari sighed, the doctor said,

"I have never heard of anyone being cured by somebody's long sighs. Nor have I had revelation of miracle cures". He paused a while, grabbed a piece of vegetable or something that was stuck between his teeth, spat it out and continued. "Even God can't help your patient".

Every one was hoping for a quick end. But they were also experts in expressing false sympathy. Looking at them the doctor said.

"If you want to take him back I have no objection"

Finally when his eyes rested on Thangal he asked.

"Can't you at least try?"

"O.K."

Without another word the doctor took out a big form and filled it up. Once in a while he kept the tip of the pen on his lips. Finally he signed the form, dated it and pressed on the calling bell. Immediately the ward boy appeared. Glaring at him the doctor handed him the paper. When he got out of the room with it, the doctor stared out through the door as if he were witnessing an accident.

The ward boy reappeared and started to push the patient lying on the stretcher "Alright" said the doctor "if he dies, I'll let you know. I don't wish you to crowd this small place waiting for a hopeless case. As it is I breathe in a lot of poisonous air"

Thangal was dumb struck. When he got up the doctor said to him.

"O.K. Thangal, See you"

He didn't see the mocking smile on the doctor's face. He got out without saying anything. Outside the carriers rolled up the canvas stretcher into a bundle and started to walk away. Thangal followed them in the carriage.

Just as he reached the front garden of the house, his wife Attabi appeared from behind the curtain. She looked unusually beautiful to him. But before his thoughts could run into any wild desire, he pulled the reins; after all it was the season of fasting and penitence.

"He is not fasting, that rascal!" She blurted out. Thangal was confused, his face expressed a bewildering surprise at the existence of such a person in his house. Yet he didn't know who it was.

"Who?"

"That Kunjali, who else. Eating and drinking like a buffalo. That kafeer is enjoying his fast!"

Thangal went up the stairs. He could hear sounds from Kunjali's room. When he went in, they stood up like two culprits.

Kunjali and Pookunji; a book was left wide open on the bed. Thangal closed it and read the title - Chithravali.

"What are you doing here?"

"We are reading our lessons".

"Are you fasting?" he asked Pookunji

"Yes, but he is not"

"You are not fasting - why do you make such mistakes Kunjali?"

"I was fasting, but after some time I got hungry" stammered Kunjali. Thangal didn't talk. He just stroked Kunjali's head. Then seeing the red marks on his face he asked,

"What is this?"

Kunjali didn't reply but Pookunji did.

"Umma beat him up for not observing the fast". Looking at him

she continued.

"She beat him when he was about to have his tea, so he didn't have any"

Thangal hugged him closer and said,

"Next year, he will observe all the fasts".

36

The three days and nights in the hospital seemed like three long years to Eramullan. He had to bear so much squalor, torture and pain in that hospital,

There were thirty patients in the room but only eleven beds, so the rest slept on the floor. Then there were a host of relatives and social workers to attend to them. They always outnumbered the sick.

Groans and complaints were the only sounds that came out of that ward. During the day for about two hours there was a little peace and quiet, that was when the doctor came on his rounds. But the minute he was out, groans and moans would rise again with a vengeance.

The one in charge of Eramullan was an old woman. Her anger against the whole world was clearly visible on each of the wrinkles on her face. A face that was never tainted with a smile or trace of any joy.

In the morning she came in and checked his pulse for a minute; even before that she stuck a stick that measured temperature into his mouth. Then she scribbled fast on a pad hung at the end of his bed.

After a while she came back with a big bottle of medicine. The big needle a the end of it frightened him. But the ward boy who followed the nurse was more frightening. He held his arm in a vice grip when the nurse poked him with the needle. Unless she stabbed

the needle a couple of times, she was never satisfied. Once she inserted it properly, she started to pump at the back of the bottle with unnecessary strength.

"This is glucose, you devil"

Later there were more injections, small jobs with smaller needles. On the buttocks and the shoulders. For three days he suffered all this then on the third night when everything was quiet in the ward he heard the adhan from some mosque. Eramullan was flustered. Was the call for prayer coming from his mosque? Or was it from somewhere else?

He sat upon the bed; he could see and his head stayed up. He got down his bed. He could even walk, fortunately no one was looking at him, slowly he began to walk out, the door.

Outside, beyond the gate, in the road there was no light. A dark blanket of loud covered the sky, in anticipation of summer shower.

He walked in the dark. His cracked feet brushed against torns and stones but he didn't feel any pain. He continued to walk towards the mosque, sniffing like a hound.

37

It was around twelve 'O' clock; work in the kitchen was still going on. The main dish for dinner was about to be taken off the flame. So Kuraisi Pathu's attention was solely directed to it. Actually this was Valiya Thangal's favorite dish; the karemeen curry cooked in coconut milk with a lot of ghee, curry leaves, plump chillies and ginger root.

Some of the kitchen maids were dozing off, leaning on the wall, some others were on the floor. The fasting masters and mistresses slept all day and ate all night. As for the maids, they worked all the time - during the day they cooked and at night they fed; none of them ever had the good fortune to sit down and have a peaceful meal, after a hard day's fasting. In a few hours they had to be up and ready for the next session of work.

Suddenly they heard the dinner gong. This banging on the plate was a new device started by Thangal to let every one know that dinner was ready. It was almost four in the morning. The sleeping maids woke with a start, spitting out the thick saliva from their numb mouths, they wiped their faces and got up. "Set the plates, girls! Why do you sleep like this?" shouted Pathumma. Then Hydrose the servant boy stormed into the kitchen. Sleep was still clinging to his face like a millipede yet it was full of anger too.

"Isn't the food ready?"

This is a question he asked every day. The kitchen and the front hall were the two poles of his world . He tactfully, effectively tucked in these ends with just two questions. To the consumers in the front, it was always "Shall I bring?" So far he had never heard a negative answer to his question, which really meant 'Shall I serve the food?'

In the kitchen his question was "Is it ready?" or some times "Isn't it ready?" and the response varied between an 'Yes' or a 'Not yet'

Hydrose was tired. Lack of sleep, pains in the muscles and the fact that he had to work till morn upset him. Soon the newly washed plates were filled with steaming rice and mouth watering curries.

Balancing the dishes in his hands like a pair of weighing scales, he walked quickly to and fro between the kitchen and the front of the house. There the hungry people sat around the supra. They were impatient and they feared the coming of the day. Employing all his skill he managed to transfer all the food to the people in front within five minutes. By then one man shouted in anger "Water!".

Every wretched creature there, was thirsty. No one ever came to this house with just hunger. They all seemed to be in sufferably thirsty too. Hydrose dashed in for more supplies.

After their dinner while washing up, the dinners heard the Adhan from the mosque. The mukri and the Imam were ready and waiting.

The twenty seventh dawn of the Ramadan was about to break. Thangal returned home after the subahi. Generally after reaching home he would go straight to bed and sleep till ten. He never went riding during Ramadan. But today he couldn't afford to go to sleep.

By morning the Zakat crowd would be thronging at the door. He was the man who paid the highest amount of Zakat in that neighborhood. Once in while Attabi complained, "Your charity will ruin us"

"A little generosity never destroyed any one. If it does good will prevail". With an explanation of sorts Thangal would go to the next person in line with a five rupees note in his hand. This was the time when a teacher was paid thirty rupees and the collector a hundred and twenty as their salary.

It was already morning and Buhari ran all around the place with a stick in his hand, trying to control the crowd. From the station road to the gate, women, children and old men were flocking together. Every one o them was poor, women were flocking together. Every one of them was poor, women devoid of any jewellery, skinny children with bulging tummies and old men with only a stick to support them in their old age and with thick layers of cataract in their dim eyes, waited patiently for Thangal.

Valia Thangal came. "What's all this noise?", he asked; that spurred Buhari into action. He ran up and down the crowd, holding the stick menacingly in his hand and abusing them with the choicest words. Thangal scolded him, "Buhari! Are you the ring leader in a circus? Stop it and get out".

Buhari calmed down. Thangal came to the gate with a big pot full of coins and a box full of paper currency. One by one the poor came forward and Thangal offered coins and notes into the out-stretched hands. When a middle aged woman from the seashore came for a second time, Buhari flared up.

"She is coming, a second time"

"Tell me the truth or I'll kill you. Did you come before?", Thangal asked angrily

"Yes".

"Where is the money?"

She took out a coin, it was an eight anna piece.

"Beast! No Zakat for you" He took the eight anna back and kicked her on her buttocks.

The Zakat went on till evening. All that time Kunjali stood close to Thangal watching each person coming up or money. He was getting to know the extent of poverty and suffering on planet earth. His mind was filled with the picture of the woman, the dejection on her face when Thangal took back the Zakat.

In the evening when the crowd was all gone Buhari got out. In the west the sun was setting, yet there were two more hours for the fast to break. His stomach was on fire. All day he was stuck at the gate.

When he reached Kannan the nine half's tea stall, he looked around. There was no one in sight. Immediately he crawled into the shop through the back door. The room at the back was fully dark. But Kannan peeped out. Seeing him he said

"How come you didn't show up in the morning?"

"That stupid Zakat! Bring something fast I haven't even had a sip of water today".

Buhari abstained not only from prayers but also from fasting. His stomach just couldn't take it.

There was nothing but fire in his belly.

It was when he was eating and drinking he heard the horrible news. Someone was found dead in the masjid grounds. Leaving his tea and snack, he ran.

When he reached the muhami he saw a crowd to the south of it. Pushing his way through the murmuring crowd he went in. Some people were covering their noses. Thangal was right in front flagged by Military Ibrahim and Ever-ready-Saidali.

A dead person was lying across an old grave amidst the nochil bushes. He must have been dead for two or three days. The body was bloated and smelly.

Buhari pinched his nose.

It was Ever ready Saidali who touched the body first; he tried to lift the sagging head, when he failed he pushed the body with both his hands. It turned over and they saw the face. For a while no one said anything then Ever ready Saidali cried:

"Eramullanikka!"

Then all was sheer commotion. The whole village was there. The adhikari, the drummer, two police men, one was head constable and the other mere policeman. They examined the body and questioned the onlookers. After that they prepared a report with that began the last chapter of Eramullan's death.

Two pariahs packed him in a mat and carried him to the Govt.Hospital where the doctor was waiting to conduct the post mortem.

After the autopsy, standing amidst the fragrant smoke spiralling upwards, the doctor said,

"When you were alive you were brought to me. But then your body was already beyond repair; but my maker decided that I should operate on you. So you have come back to my table as a corpse. Thanks" After the monologue to himself he said to the waiting world.

"Take him away"

The doctor's orders brought the pariahs back. Then came friends and relatives.

The pariahs packed Eramullan's pieces in the same mat and carried him back to karakkad on the same bamboo poles.

All the funeral arrangements were made at the Tharavad. Actually there was not much of a body. The hospital had removed whatever was useful to them and the rest was all cut up into bits of pieces. What could anyone do with such a body?

Eramullan who had washed and neatly wrapped the corpses all his life for funerals could not even be bathed properly for his last rite. The irony of fate, What else! Was there any need for such a death and a post mortem for him?

They washed him like pieces of meat and then arranged the chunks in the shape of a body. With that funeral rites for Eramullan was over. By the time they transferred the body draped in a white sheet to the stretcher it became stained. And the stains on the sheet grew beggar and bigger like a map.

They buried him to the south of the Muhami fourteen feet, away from Husain Koya's grave.

38

It was truly a day of mourning in Arakkal house. After the funeral Thangal walked back silently to house. But he didn't go in. Instead he slumped dolefully on the chair in the veranda. His huge body, even his sizable belly seemed to have shrunk in size but the heaviness in his head increased a double fold.

A lot of people were sitting in front of the house. But no one spoke. They were ruminating like cows. Was it with the memory of the deceased or with reflections of their own end?

"It was a sad end indeed" said someone but no one rejoined.

As it was the season of Ramadan, the servant boy stood idle with folded hands. Usually on a day like this, he would end up working till he was about fall apart but today he didn't even have to pass a cigar around. In the kitchen also there was a complete lockout. No one worked, everyone sat leaning on the wall.

Pathu sat sighing occasionally. The death of her old flame who wanted to marry her in her youth stunned her and it rendered her associated into silence.

Pookunji went into Kunjali's room with a frightened face. He was not very perturbed about Eramullan's death. He was celebrating his success in the fifth grade.

As soon as she came into the room Kunjali got up, held both her hands and said

"I passed"

"You passed!" Pookunji showed surprise and then asked. "Who told you?

"Buhari"

"He is a real smart alec" she seemed to admire his cleverness in discerning this great secret.

Then suddenly she asked

"How about me?"

Kunjali hesitated for a moment and then said.

"I don't know"

Then she said.

"I know I won't pass"

Those days muslim girls were never allowed to pass the fifth grade. Because by then they were forced to stop their studies. Shankarakurup never passed any girls in the fifth class. Though Kunjali knew about it, he didn't reveal this little secret to Pookunji.

They were silent for a while. When they looked out through the window, they saw the rain tree, jack tree and the mango tree all stripped to their bare bones wilting in the sun. It was the last days of April. The sky was over case suddenly a cold wind swept through the air. Then Kunjali said.

"It must be raining in the Kuttiyadi Hills"

The sky became darker, the wind grew stronger; tree tops swayed to and fro and the rain came down in big drops. Before it grew into a steady drizzle, there was thunder and lightning. That was all. Then the wind died down and the clouds slowly drifted west wards leaving the sky clear and bright.

All on a sudden a fire cracker exploded in Kunjipally announcing the break of the fast. The people in the hall were served with just a glass of water and a fruit. Then Thangal asked them to go back and pray.

Hydrose was left alone on the empty porch. To him Eramullan's death day turned out to be a day that ought to be inscribed in golden letters. The only ramadan day when the visitors left the house with an empty stomach. He too drank a glass of water. Today was his happy day and he wanted nothing but some cold water to make it perfect.

Do people have any other sensation besides hunger, he wondered. According to his system people had only a stomach and the only substance that truly existed in this world was food. Hunger, food and stomach were the only reality in his life.

Unexpectedly Attabi stormed into the kitchen; the echo of her silver thongs reverberated in the air. Wiping the beads of

perspiration with her slender fingers and raising her shapely eyebrows she declared,

"Why is everybody just sitting around? I haven't lost anyone"

The maids sprang up in a hurry.

"Cook some food fast or I'll bash up all of you and throw you out".

In an instant the lamps were lit, grinding and pounding started in earnest and the hearth spit fire like sparklers. The kitchen was alive again.

Though he was fasting the whole day Kunjali didn't feel hungry at all. His heart was dancing in the joy of success. He had passed his fifth grade. Now it was time to join the high school. He wanted to work hard, graduate from tenth and become a deputy inspector.

In the short span of twelve years of his life he had dreamt of taking up many professions. At the time of the Onjeeyam firing he wanted to be a policeman; then when he was lucky enough to touch Abdul Rahaman's car he wanted to be a driver but when he saw Rairu Kurup's son Kamaran Nair getting out of the train in his military uniform, he hoped to become a soldier. Later when he saw the deputy inspector, who was held in awe by even Shankara Kurup master he wanted to become just that. Rama Krishna Iyer who could gobble up two measures of flat rice, sixteen bananas, and half a measure of jaggery and two big cups of tea in one stretch and still consume a full course meal, in another ten minutes. The fellow was indeed a dare devil!

Hearing some one moving about he turned around. He had been facing the wall.

"Yes, what do you want?"

He was rather piqued at Pookunjibi for disturbing his daydream. But he didn't show it. After all she was Pookunjibi.

"I am afraid"

"Afraid?" he asked.

Sitting close to him on his bed she continue.

"I heard Eramullan doing the Adhan!" His first reaction was to laugh. But then a shiver ran down his spine.

"You go and sleep with Pathu"

"Pathumma got sick. Now she is unconscious".

On dreadful days like Pathu got attacks of fits and then later fell into a faint. Dr. Thamapan who examined her had called it hysteria or some such something.

Kunjali didn't answer Pookunji. He just kept looking out of the window. Outside it was very murky. The leaves of the rain tree appeared like drops of ink on a gray umbrella against the darkening eastern sky. After a while he asked her.

"Why don't you go down?"

"I am scared".

Pookunji was always afraid. As the night grew her fear grew too. When the jackals howled, when the owls hooted or when the hyena laughed she would grow pale. She shivered at the wind moving in the air, the dry leaves rustling on the ground, the bang of a gun shot and the sound of fireworks from the temple. At night she dreamt of only devils and giants. She believed the night had many hands like the octopus to grab her. She was mortally afraid of the Jinn prince of her old dreams, snatching her away on his horse.

Caught up in his contemplations Kunjali fell asleep. When he woke up in the middle of the night he was shocked to discover a hand on him. When he has about to cry out in fear he realised that those hands were familiar to him. They were Pookunjibi's sleepy little hands. Very gently he shifted her hand from him to her and slowly edged away to a corner, making a little space between the two of them.

Just before dawn Pathumma had another attack. Snorting loudly she rolled on the ground like an ox about to be slaughtered. Attabi was the first to reach her room. She raised the wick of the egg shaped lamp.

Pathumma had fallen off the bed. Now she was lying flat on the floor. Only her eyebrows and thumb were twitching.

"Oh, my Eramullan...."

She cried gradually, her shouting turned to a howling, growing strong and loud. When the weeping and sighing stopped, she

calmed down. The maids lifted a worn out Pathu from the floor, laid her on the bed and wiped her.

Slowly Pathumma opened her eyes.

"Do you want to drink anything?" Some one asked her. Pathu only moved her lips, then she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

It was then that Attabi noticed the empty bed on the other side.

"Where is Pookunji" she asked aloud. Pookunji was nowhere around.

Every one ran out with a light in search of her. They looked in the bathrooms, the kitchen, under the bed, outside, inside and in every room.

When a maid came down the stairs and stood like a criminal in front of Attabi, she asked.

"Why do you look like an owl?"

"Beekutty is upstairs".

Hearing that every one ran up. The stairs groaned under their weight. When they stood around the bed with light in their hands only one person was burning with anger. Spitting fire she hissed.

"Bastard! He will do this and more". Clenching her fists she threatened,

"Let morning come"

The silver studded thongs went down the stairs; the steps had no music or rhythm in it. Behind her the maids went down noiselessly. As their feet were plain naked, they couldn't make the grand sound that was music to their ears.

39

From mouth to mouth the story reached everyone. Kunjali was embarrassed beyond words. Why on earth did she have to come and sleep on his bed at night?

Pookunjibi one the other hand, was not even a bit flustered. When Pathu came out of her seizure she asked,

"Pookunji, aren't you ashamed?"

"Why?" she pretended to know nothing.

"Why did you sleep in Kunjali's bed?"

"Oh" she said with great deliberation "Because I was sleepy".

After his morning ablutions and a cup of tea Kunjali was sitting in his room, drawing an owl on his slate. Then Buhari came in looking very stern. He warned.

"Thangal is calling you!" Seeing Kunjali shudder he asked.

"Are you scared? Boy! You are in trouble alright"

His feet dragging Kunjali managed to climb down the stairs; he felt as if a toad was lodged in his heart. When he came down Thangal was sitting on his chair smoking a Singapore cigar. Military Ibrahim sat next to him, staring at the spiraling puff of smoke. A lot of other men lounged around leaning on the pillars and a group os Theeya tenants waited beyond the porch.

Shankara Kurup master was there too; he was seated on a chair and was busy chewing pan. The sight of his face reduced Kunjali to a pulp.

"Come here" the master called him. He walked towards the master. When Shankara Kurup held him close the stench of stale starch nauseated him. The master's eyes were brimming with tears. But Kunjali didn't see it. Only when the warm tears plopped on his arm did he realize that the master was crying. Shankara Kurup's voice was heavy with emotion.

"Even though you have to leave our school. I wish you luck. May you bring laurels to Karakked muslim school"

By now Kunjali's eyes were moist too. He knew he was saved!

"After you graduate from high school what do you want to be?" asked Shankara Kurup.

"Deputy Inspector" replied Kunjali without hesitation.

Shankara Kurup smiled, then after a long pause he said.

"Right, but please don't turn any one into a supernumerary, O.K?"

Kunjali couldn't decipher the meaning of that statement.

Next day early in the morning holding on to Shankara Kurup master's hand, Kunjali was on his way to the high school. Just before they left Thangal handed two ten rupees notes to Kurup. Seeing the baffled look on his face, Thangal explained,

"For fees and other expenses".

"That's very good". Pocketing the money Shankara Kurup said.

Walking over the ridges of the paddy field the two of them reached the stream and the bridge over it. Beyond that there was a temple and then came the sandy fields. They could hear the roar of the sea from very. The school was quite close to the sea.

There was a crowd in front of the head master's office a lot of teachers and the children who had come for admission.

Standing on the long school veranda Kunjali looked at the surroundings. To his west was the rumbling ocean. Far, far away in the horizon canoes appeared like little dots. To his north and east were fisherman's hut. The old folks sitting in front of the houses were busy repairing the nets and the young pretty maids were engaged in twisting coir into ropes.

Touching him on the shoulder Shankara Kurup master called him; they walked to the tea stall in front of the school. It was Kunjiraman's place. The tea stall where Kunjali went often to plug his hunger at noon, during his days at the new school.

When they walked in, Kunjiraman's tea stall was full of people who came to the school. He was running up and down the little restaurant. Balancing many empty glasses on his palm like a circus man, he began his brisk work. His fair stout wife was seen washing dishes in a thick liquid of water in a corner. A kid with a runny nose stood next to her, holding on to her clothes. Kunjiraman came up to them.

"Yes?'

"One full tea and a half tea!" ordered Shankara Kurup; after a pause he asked

"Anything to munch?"

"Steaming poot and moong dal curry".

"What else?"

"Hot sugiyan".

"Hot buns"

Every item in his stall seemed to be either hot or steaming. "Alright then poot and curry" he said.

Kunjali in the meantime was studying Kunjiraman. He was one eyed. His clouded right eye had no iris in it with only one good eye he kept turning his head constantly to his left and to his right.

By the time they were called into the head master's office it was almost three o' clock. The principal, Sadashivan Pillai, was sitting behind a table full of files, papers and books. He had a stylish pair of glasses on, every strand of his well groomed long hair was in place. He was dressed in a cream shirt, pant and black shoes. He had a fair complexion, charming smile and an ever present cigarette on his lips.

Sadashivan Pillai was not more than twentyfive. He was from Vaikkam, the first teacher from Travanacore to come to Malabar. As soon as he completed his B.A. BT he had joined the fisheries. Since he was the first graduate in the department, the old teachers called him "lucky"

Now the lucky man asked Kunjali

"Will you study well"

Kunjali feeling shy looked down and stayed dumb.

"Then you don't get admission" said the head master. Kunjali, startled, promptly replied,

"I'll study well sir"

"Smart boy, what will you study?" He didn't know the answer to that, so he bent his head again. After that Kunjali never lifted his head in front of Sadashivan Pillai.

It was raining on the first day of school. The school opened on the first of June and the whole day was dark and dreary, Kunjali

was greatly disappointed, his new clothes new umbrella and his shaven head were all drenched. When he reached the school he was soaking wet.

He went into the classroom, closed his umbrella kept it in a corner and then sat on the bench. The bell had not yet rung. The old boys were playing fiercely in the class. Suddenly some one touched his smooth scalp and shouted.

Musalman's egg

Lump of chalk

See it break

Dum!

Kunjali felt real sad, there was not one kid with a shaven head in the class. Soon the bell rang and Andy master walked in with cane in his hand and the register under his arm. The children trembled in fear. To them he was a nightmare. The cane was an integral part of his body and every child in the class was thoroughly walloped with it.

The master sat on the chair, tossed the book aside and banged the cane on the table and asked.

"Do you know, how to knot a fishing net, sons of the sea?"

No one answered.

"Do you know to catch fish, you fools?

Again no one stirred.

Then coming down hard on the table legs and the top of the table with his switch, he shouted

"I shall teach you all this. This is the Government fisheries technical school, keep that in your mind, veterans"

Trembling like leaves the children sat listening. Bending like an arrow to a side, Andy master pulled out a matchbox and beedi from his fathomless pocket, lit it and took a long puff. Then he continued,

"I'll teach you nature studies, gardening, net making and fishery science".

Surveying the whole class with his reddish eyes he took out a small box from his left pocket. He inhaled a pinch of snuff, rubbed the sides of his nose with the hollow of his palm and then sneezed many times.

"Dear children, if you don't learn your nature science and gardening I'll forgive you. If you don't learn your fishery science I'll pardon you. But if you don't learn to mend your nets I'll beat the day lights out of you".

Thrusting his thumb out at Kunjali, Andy master asked" What is your name?" He always pointed with his thumb as if aiming a pistol. Sitting firmly on his seat, Kunjali replied,

'Kunjali'

"Which school did you come from?"

"Karakkad mappila school"

"Don't they teach you any manners there, you devil?" Kunjali was flabbergasted. The master bellowed,

"Stand up and answer, you swine"

This was not the practice in the Karakkad muslim school. It was a school meant for the Saiyids. The Saiyids are not required to stand up before any one. They were direct descendents of Nabi so the tradition dictates that they sit when they talk to either believers or non believers.

Kunjali stood up. His eyes were as dark as clouds.

"Why are you scuttling back like a crab?"

Noting that he was about to cry Andy master softened.

"Alright, now you may sit down. Hereafter when ever you answer a question, you should stand up. Then there is another matter. Come here".

When Kunjali went to him, the master rubbed his long fingers over his smooth head. Then he said,

"Don't do this; such a head has never come here before" He looked over the whole class and asked.

"Do you understand?" Actually Kunjali didn't have a clue. So Andy master explained.

"Don't shave off your hair again. When you see the Ossan, take to your heels. I'll take care of the rest; even if Thangal agrees to grow your hair the mussaliar will be after you"

The whole class joined in the ensuing laughter. The sound was deafening.

"Shut up, you dogs, or I'll shave every one of your heads" The shocking threat made them mute in an instant.

After that Kunjali never had his head shaven. Andy master took the initiative as he had promised. He met Thangal on behalf of Kunjali and settled the matter.

One day when Kunjali's hair had grown fully he looked in the mirror. The whole head was covered with dark hair! His face was changed too . Slowly it dawned on him that he was a handsome boy.

However, he could never enjoy a stroll outside now. Once when he was on the station road some one called him from behind.

"Dai, Khafeer"

Turning around he saw the mussaliar. His eyes were burning with anger.

"So you have joined the school, I see. Now you'll learn English and become a Khafeer, won't you, swine?'

Kunjali didn't open his mouth.

"We have no problem with that. But this hair! We can't stand it".

Stroking his hair the mussaliar continued,

"You can crop your hair, my boy, but when you are out on the road, tie a scarf around your head".

Kunjali began to walk away with a face that proclaimed that the mussaliar's wish was his command.

Then he called him back.

"Come on, son, I'll buy you a glass of tea from Kannan's stall"

"Thank you Seedi but let me go" with that he pulled out a scarf from his pocket and tied it around his head. After all he could never disregard his Moosa mussaliar.

40

Thiruvathira Jatuvela had just begun. The season of nonstop rain. Day and night it poured without a break. In every house people came down with cold and cough and cursed the rain. The entire earth was under water and there was nothing but water in the sky. The sun was long banished from there, so were the stars.

Occasionally children getting down to the porch stretched their hands to catch the water dripping from the eves. Old men gathered around fires drying their already dried up body. Worker's with empty stomachs settled on their beds and stared at the sky with wide open eyes.

Back in the Tharavad it was restive time. The rainy days were truly days of leisure for Thangal; when it rained he cancelled his morning rides.

Thangal got up in the morning. By the time he finished prayers, Hydrose brought some eight boiled and shelled eggs and a tall glass of milk for his breakfast. Once that was over with a little burp he came back to the front of the house to sit on his favorite chair.

He watched the unending rain, the sight of water falling and meeting pools for a long long time. When it got nippy he went in to get his sweater, weaing it he came back to his chair.

The front gate was still closed. Thangal saw a figure all bundled up sleeping on the veranda. Rain or shine Buhari refused to sleep any where else and he never bothered to get up unless some one came along to disturb him.

Looking in, Thangal called Hydrose. He came running like a watch dog.

"A good hot cup of tea" As soon as he got the order, rubbing his freezing hands together for warmth, Hydrose withdrew into the house.

Fortified with a hot cup of tea Thangal was ready for action. But there was no one to talk to or to entertain. When he was about to be bored with inaction he remembered the book some one had left behind the previous day. It was the story of Husunual Jamal and Badarul Muneer. A timeless love story that could be read a million times.

With the book in his hand. Thangal began to sing it aloud.

41

When it didn't rain for two days in a row it was like a miracle in the rainy season. On the third day the sky was clear and the day seemed as bright as summer. After his prayers Thangal came out dressed in his jeans and Khaki shirt ready for his ride.

The horse man was already waiting in the front as usual. Every day in every season be it summer or winter the man got the horse ready in the morning. If Thangal cancelled his ride, he turned back to the stable with the horse.

As far as he was concerned, the animal was not the issue but the reins were.

The true spirit is in reins, the horse just happens to be attached to the end of it, was his much repeated statement. On his first day at work Thangal asked him.

"Your name?"

"Horseman"

"Is that really your name?"

"Yes" he insisted firmly. When Thangal thought about it, he didn't find it very strange. After all the person who drives a vehicle

is a driver, the one who tends the cow is a cow-herd and the man who steals is a thief. They are all known by their profession. So why shouldn't this one. From then on every one called him the horseman.

"Horseman, the horse's gram is cooked" or "Horseman, Thangal is calling" or "Horseman, your food is ready" These were the only instructions he ever heard in the house.

He was not the talkative kind. He had a donkey face and his long ears stuck out from the sides. His eyes were deep and thoughtful. His lower jaw slopped down and his lips were always wet with bubbles of spittle. He talked little, ate little and slept little and the rest of the time he spent talking to the horse. He was the only man in the village who knew the language of the beasts.

Holding the reins Thangal sprang on to the saddle and the horse galloped like a stallion from the Arabian nights allowing his cooped up energy to surge ahead.

The horse raced through the mosque grounds to the path beyond the graves. It looked as if the animal was bent on stunning the earth with the might of its hooves. It ran with its head held high and it was said later that for years no grass grew on the path where the horse had sped on that day. Indeed it turned out to be a historic race.

Thangal was in high spirits too. Bending so low as to touch the back of the horse with his broad chest and often spurring the horse, he began to fly through the air.

The horse raced past the station, and main road to the dingy lanes leading to the seashore. It was still dark and the horse ran through the sandy beach, laboriously yanking its leg out of the sand slopes of Gosai Hills. Soon it began to froth at the mouth. That was always the sign of the end of the journey.

The vast expanses of land stretching from the stony river to the Gosai hills was Thangal's empire. The large coconut gardens with lots and lots of cottages and people in it, all belonged to Thangal.

The tired horse finally stopped in front of a small hut. Its door was shut. Thangal got down. He opened the door and looked in. Behind him the sea was roaring. He went in.

The young lady sleeping on a mat woke up startled. She was Perachan's bride from Elathoor, new to the place. The wife of a young fisherman out in the sea. They were still celebrating their honeymoon in their new home.

She sprang up from the mat. A tall woman, her abundant hair covered her back. Her navel was smooth and her breasts small but firm. Her eyes wide enough to reflect a whole village.

Thangal didn't waste a moment. Erotic thoughts were crowding his mind. He smiled sensuously. Slowly he moved forward. The comely maid shrank back in fear and asked.

"Who are you?"

By now his smile had expanded into a grin, it stretched from one ear to the other.

"Don't you know me? You haven't heard of Pookoya? Hasn't your man told you anything?"

"No..........No.......nothing". As she was about to ask him to leave, her mouth was covered by a heavy hand.

The helpless women fell to the floor.

"Who the devil is in here?"

A thunder crashed! Though it hadn't rained for three whole days.

"Who's in here?"

The thunder boomed again. Thangal tried to rise. But before he could get up Perachan's long dagger stabbed into his back. The knife went in and it came out several times. Then Thangal turned on his back. Now the stabs were on the chest. Perachan jabbed him ruthlessly till he was worn out. Finally pulling the knife, he sniffed the blood on it.

"Stinking blood", he said.

After that he wiped the knife clean with his fingers. The he wiped his fingers on Thangal's face, folded the knife and walked towards the east.

His wife lay fainted in a pool of blood next to Thangal who

convulsed in the throes of death.

The sun was up and the day was bright. But it didn't shine on the splash of blood in the hut. Pookoya Thangal's blood froze to a thick slab.

The murder of Pookoya Thangal shocked the village like the firing in Onjeeyam. Who ever heard the news abandoned their hut, women ran wailing in groups. Shops were closed. The seashore was deserted. Only the fishing boats stood bobbing in the water.

It was Adhikari Kunjunni Nair who reached the deserted beach first, following by drummer Appukutty Marar. Except for these two, there was not a soul left in the entire area. Leaving Marar to guard the corpse, Adhikari walked to the police station.

By then the news had spread to the east and every one came running. They thronged around Perchan's shack. A crowd of people stood crying, screaming, sobbing, whispering, murmuring, and prodding each other.

Later the Police arrived - a van full of them. There was a circle (Malabar Special Police) Inspector from Calicut, besides him a truck full of M.S.P's came with their guns. Seeing them the people were scared. One by one they tried to escape from the scene.

When the huge circle inspector with a small head got out of the front seat, the vehicle rose to its right height, seeing his big moustache, bulging tummy, fiery looks and the baton the children began to inch backwards. Slowly it escalated into a run. When Buhari spotted the M.S.P's holding the M.S.P's holding their guns, he warned the others "They will fire now!" and began to run. The crowd was petrified, they scampered here and there and the circle inspector promptly screamed,

"Charge!"

Jumping out of their trucks the M.S.P.'s beat people mercilessly. Leaving a very dead Thangal alone, his kith and kin, neighbors and fellow men ran helter skelter. Some to the east, where there was an unending stretch of land.

Some others who ran to the west, raced back when they reached the ocean. They were again bashed up on their return. Another group of cunning ones took shelter in the gosai hills.

Finally there was peace around the hut. And the police, M.S.P's and the Adhikari were left with the corpse.

Once the police report was prepared the pariahs wrapped Thangal's body in green palm leaves. They lifted him onto the police van. One by one the M.S.P's jumbed into the security of their fortified truck. Then the procession moved. First the jeep, then the van followed by the truck; the pariahs walked behind it all to bring back the cadaver.

Along way off Dr. Thampan was waiting for them, all prepared to perform the autopsy.

42

Normally the bier was kept in the mohami. It was huge and heavy enough to tire even the most able bodied men. It was Thangal himself who had ordered this big funeral cot for the mosque. Four strong men brought the bier to the house. They laid it on the porch.

People crowded every where, inside and outside the house, in the yard beyond the wall, in every nook and corner. They were all sad. The sudden demise of this pillar of society had left them in dismay. Their faces were dark with grief and their heads hung low.

They laid the dead body wrapped in white cloth and tied three times, into the open coffin. Then someone closed its folds and the body was locked in.

"Shall we start?" asked some one. But there was no one in charge to reply. With the death of the hero, the drama had come to an end.

The coffin was lifted and procession moved on with a "La Illah....illalla.....! L illah illalla!"

Inside Attabi was wailing aloud. Her heart rending cries were heard out on the veranda. In the days when Thangal was alive no one heard her voice outside the house. But today it came loud and clear-not her words but her grief. Her outbursts depressed the people even more. The short journey was covered in utter silence.

The coffin was now taken into the mosque. There were lots of people waiting to attend the funeral prayer. Those who couldn't get in stayed outside. Every one stood up for prayer. The Khaliar recited the prayer in a grave voice. Never again would he have to lead Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal of Arakkal house in prayer.

When the prayer came to an end people crowded around the dead body to see that dear face for the last time.

Now the body was slowly lowered into the grave on solid ropes, only then did they realize that the grave was not long enough for the body. So the legs remained folded. The knee which had never bended before anyone in life, buckled under death.

Each one tossed in a handful of dust three times over. That was more than enough to cover the deep grave. Over it came the slabs and the head stone. With that one more tomb was added to the grave yard.

One by one people began to leave. Soon the crowd dispersed in all directions.

43

After attending Thangal's funeral from a distance, Kannan, the nine and a half, was on his way home. On the road he met Kannapuram Swamy. His clothes were stinking dirty, his face was black and blue and there was blood on the matted hair. The rag he had wrapped around him was constantly rubbing against the infected wound on his heels. One look at him and Kannan realized that there was a kind of aversion or a sneer on the Swamy's face.

Shortly after, the true story of the Swamy's ordeal started to spread through the station. It seems the M.S.P. had arrested the swamy suspecting him to be a communist. Though he was tortured for three days and three nights he didn't care. He stood his ground like a brinjal and revealed nothing. Then the inspector agreed that he was a 'true Sanyasi!' and let him go.

Moved by the Swamy's misery, Kannan said to the people in his tea stall.

"Let's take a collection".

Hearing his suggestion everyone stared at him.

"You give me a cup of strong tea, you and your stupid ideas" retorted Kokkathi Kanaran.

"Nothing stupid about it" insisted Kannan.

"Look at the poor swamy, we should get a new robe stitched for him".

That's how the whole business about the collection started. Thekkyil Koran Muthalai who had come to attend Thangal's funeral started the ball rolling with a full rupee. Soon the others followed with one anna, two annas, one and a half anna, and a quarter rupee till the contribution grew to four rupees.

They bought six yards of cloth from Nanu's Textiles. That cost only three rupees. From the one rupee left, they kept aide twelve annas for tailoring charges and for the other four annas they got some for the Swamy, hoping to make him happy.

Nanu began to stitch the robe and the others caught and led the Swamy to the well near the railway station. The pully groaned and the bucket went straight down but when it came up it was only half filled with water for there was a big hole at the bottom of the bucket.

Before long they began to pour water on Swamy. Direct and slush streamed down his matted locks. When they began to wash with soap, the water in gutter changed colour, mosquitoes and other insects fled for their lives. The repelling stink was too much even for those pests.

In an hour they managed to bathe the Swamy clean. Water flowed like a river around the well. The villagers had never poured so much water even on mad-cap-Kunjahamed's head. It was stilling dripping from the Swamy's hair and beard and a smile of contentment flitted on his face.

Nanu came to the well with a packet in hand. They peeled the wet clothes, one by one from the Swamy's body. Now Nanu opened the packet.

After all, the carpenter who built the house, should enter it first.

He lifted the robe from the packet shook it vigorously. The whiff of new cotton spread in the air and then drifted towards the paddy fields.

The Swamy sauntered a few times in his new clothes. Actually he swirled around the well, showing his respect for the source of his cleanliness.

The people who bathed the Swamy were back in Kannans' stall drinking black tea. That evening there was no milk available because Kannan's cow had died suddenly. It seems it had eaten some cassava leaves earlier in the day.

But poor Kannan's troubles didn't stop there . Grieving for their dead cow Kannan's wife had severely beaten her chest and now she had fainted in pain. When he was getting ready ;to go home to take care of all these misfortunes he had to the face the last straw.

The Swamy who was sitting near the well staring at the slushy water got up slowly and like a dragon fly fell flat into the grime. Then he rolled about in it a few times. When he stood up he looked like some vegetable dipped in batter. The astonished audience lifted their fingers to their nose.

After that the Swamy proceeded to the carpenter's house. There was nobody in the house then. The carpenter had gone somewhere to fix a door frame and his wife was out in the field between the coconut trees, twisting a rope. So she didn't see the Swamy come. When her hands began to ache she stopped her work, went to the well, drank some water to fill her stomach and walked back to the house.

Then smelling something awful, she looked in and saw the Swamy sitting stiff like a stick. So far he had never gone into their house to sit. The veranda was his usual abode. Seeing him in there the woman got frightened. She came out and sat quietly without making any sound.

Outside, dusk was spreading. The sound of a ballad from the faraway field became faint. The Theeya women had reached the last lines of the heroic deeds and tragic fall of Thacholi Othenan. Gradually the slow, sad, measured lines of the folk son came to an end. Then a few silhouettes of people were seen moving on the dyke of the paddy field.

She didn't see the carpenter come in. Dropping his tools on the floor, he asked,

"Um? Why do you sit like this?"

The woman pointed to the room and said 'Swamy'.

The carpenter stuck his head in. As it was dark in the room, he struck a light, lit a kerosene lamp and took it close to the Swamy's torpid face. His eyes were wide open but the iris seemed to have disappeared somewhere into the upper lid leaving only a dead white ball in the place of his eyes.

The carpenter came out Perplexed at the unnatural stillness of the Swamy he went to all his neighbour Narayana Kurup. Kurup was reading his Narayaneeyam.

Kurup came back with him to the house with a torch in his hand. And flashed it on the Swamy. Mandodan Narayana Kurup was one of the few people in the village who owned a flash light. He was a very pious man and his main occupation was to bathe and pray. The fellow had only two faults. Every evening he consumed a little toddy and at night he flashed his light on places where he had no business to.

Now Kurup came out of the carpenter's house with a remark "How sad!" on his lips.

"What happened?" asked the carpenter.

"He never came into my place. I never had an opportunity to fall at his feet in my own house". He talked as he was walking.

"What should I do now?", the carpenter asked in deference.

"What is there to do? How can anyone respond to such luck?" None saw the frustration on Kurup's face.

"Please save me" the carpenter begged.

"You are already saved. There is nothing more for you to achieve".

He continued to walk and flash his torch.

"The Swamy is going to attain his samadhi". Then he complained "But he abandoned this poor sinner"

The Swamy sat still for three days and three nights. On the fourth day before dawn he breathed his last. After that there was no pulse. A lot of the villagers stood impatient in front of the carpenter's house. Suddenly water began to drop from every lead on the mango tree. It continued for a long time.

No one cried for the Swamy at his death. But every single leaf on the mango tree did.

44

An abandoned carnival ground, that is how Arakkal tharavad appeared after the death of Thangal. There were no people, no sounds nor any light.

Buhari at the guard house slept day and night. Now he could sleep not just during day, but at night too. Who was he answerable to? Below him was the floor and above him the roof of the gate house. Beyond that there was only the sky.

No one came to the front or to the porch. Once in a while Kunjali sat on a chair to read some books. That was the only sign of life in the front of the house.

Inside the house, it was the same. The maids took refuge in different corners like nestling hens without spreading wings. The servant boy wandered around the front and the kitchen, like an unemployed fellow pushing time, sitting and sleeping alternatively.

Pookunjibi cried and Attabi was in seclusion-cloistered away with her sins.

If her husband dies a woman has to live in total isolation for ninety days. She can see no one, hear no one and she should not be seen by any man. Attabi was trying hard to succeed in this Herculean task.

She lived through her days of seclusion in the same room where she had dwelt with Pookoya Thangal. But now the windows were all shut and the door was bolted from inside. Two or three basins were kept in for her toilet needs. She could not see her face, she

was not allowed to look into a mirror. Even if she were how could she look at herself?

Her head was tonsured, all the gold was taken off . Her ear lobes and her lovely neck were bare. She was dressed in black.

Though it was raining outside, inside it was always farm. She felt like a bunch of bananas kept in a smoke house to ripen. But she also realized the painful truth-she was never going to burgeon again.

Pathumma came to the door three or four times a day with food. Once in she closed the door behind her and left the food on the table. Three times a day she swallowed a bit of something. But she drank a lot of water as if it was her main food. She sweated and peed a lot too.

After each meal Pathumma removed all the dishes and the plates and came back with clean ones. She served her mistress with utmost loyalty. So much so that Attabi decided to gift her with two gold bangles when she came out of her seclusion. Pathumma was the epitome of self-sacrifice.

Then suddenly Attabi fell sick with dysentry. It started with a terrible pain in her lower abdomen. Within hours all the commodes were filled. Pathu ran in and out with chamber pots.

By evening Attabi was bed-ridden. The bed and mattress were soaked and the room reeked of human waste. Pathu managed to procure a few incense sticks to burn.

Soon Komappa Vaidyar was on the scene with his palm umbrella, Pathumma explained the details of Attabi's symptoms from behind a screen.

The Vaidyar prescribed a tablet and an arishtam. When she took it just two times the dysentry stooped for good. Then she had a big bowl of kanji water. With that the stomach became normal again.

Time stood still in her room. For Attabi day and night were the same. When it got very hot, she went near the window and opened the shutters. Outside, the moon was streaming down, the sky was all lit up. The misty frost and light met in a rapturous embrace on the out-stretched palm leaf.

Then she saw menu and women moving in a line and groups of people on the slopes of Machanari hill. They were on their way to

the mosque to listen to a sermon and Attabi longed to join them.

As she lay on the bed with longing in her heart she heard the Theeyathies singing and grinding spices for a marriage feast. The mixing and grinding of the spices on the previous day was a feast in itself.

These women knew the magic of pounding coconut and chilly to the right proportion and their songs were racy. Attabi listened to their song for a long time.

The Namboodiri of Nareimana
Doesn't want to eat or drink
His stomach is bulging
He's always picking
Let the food be hot or cold
Dark as a man carved in ebony
He got a midwife for his agony
She felt his belly
Bathed him daily
And waited on hand and foot
For four whole days
But the man didn't deliver
A babe didn't come out
The maid went mad
Waiting for forty days or more

Finally tired of listening to the song she came back to the window. A full moon was smiling down on her. Suddenly she felt guilty. It struck her like lighting and weighted her heart down. She closed the door. A woman in seclusion should see neither moon nor man. She shouldn't even hear a cock crowing let alone hear a man.

Exhausted Attabi slumped on the bed. Beyond the closed doors and windows she could hear movements and footsteps.

She woke up when some one knocked hard on the door. Attabi

got up sluggishly to lift the latch. When she did some one opened the door wide. Pathumma and a horde of other women were waiting and smiling at her. Soon the room resounded with the echoes of their laughter.

"Come outside"

Pathumma held Attabi's hand and pulled her out.

Only then did she realise that the ninety days of mourning was over. She felt like some one released from a prison. Hair was sprouting on her shaven head, her, eyes were sunk deep. She looked pale and sallow and her feet and face were swollen.

After a bath and change when she came out into the open with a dab of attar on her, she felt human again.

Out on the veranda there were a lot of men. The kitchen was busy too. The delicious smell of ghee rice wafted in from there.

Who was behind all this? Who gave them permission to ahead with all these preparations; she wondered in anger. But she didn't show her displeasure; later military Ibrahim lifted the curtain. He had a fixed smile on his face and declared happily to Attabi,

"All this was my decision" Attabi didn't respond but she silently began to remember Pokoya Thangal's story about Ibrahim that he was the sone of some saiyid. Now he was showing his true colours, efficiently taking on the responsibility and being in charge.

The dinner was grand, with chicken biryani and aleesa. Sitting in the kitchen Attabi noticed every detail. From now on she would have to take charge.

Hydrose was moving up and down like a fishing boat. His hands were always open as in prayer but they were also piled high with plates both breakable and non-breakable. Attabi had no cause to dislike Hydrose. That smart boy had never dropped a plate from his hand in all his days there.

Every one in the house was quite surprised by Attabi's behavior. She who had never paid any attention to the running of the house was scrutinising every detail. That too on the very first day of the end of her wake.

Outside people were burping and belching after dinner; soon

they were all on their way with flaming torches of dried palm leaves in hand. Attabi lifted the curtain to look out; Military Ibrahim was still there. So were some other people. Buhari was sitting in a corner eating his dinner. Listening to him chew the bones she realised that he was not a man but a true watch dog. She smiled without glee.

When the last man left the house with a burning torch in hand Ibrahim got up. He lifted the curtain and was about to say something when Attabi appeared before him; startled he sprang back and said,

"Let me take leave"

"Did you eat?"

"A lot"

"Good" After a pause she said. "Come early morning"

Ibrahim was in ecstacy. As he flashed the torch and passed the gate looking at Buhari smoking his beedi he said,

"Close the gate"

His instinctive reaction was to say 'pha, you dog'. But he didn't. His lips were always sealed and locked. The only time he opened it was to spit out.

Early next morning Military Ibrahim appeared at the gate. It was not opened. Buhari was about to have a nap after his night vigil. Ibrahim banged on the door and shouted,

"Open, you devil"

When he did Ibrahim sailed in like the master.

Kunjali and Pookunji were brushing their teeth under the flower tree. Seeing him they smiled. Pookunji's smile turned her lips into a ruby red. That was the sign of beauty, just like the blushing pink of maidens.

" Go rinse your mouth".

The children went back to their washing and rinsing. Ibrahim sat on the veranda and Pathumma came with a steaming cup of tea. Attabi was right behind her.

When he finished his tea and smoke Ibrahim was quite lost.

Should he talk? Who should he talk to? As he was worrying about it Attabi, asked,

"Ibrahim, did you have your tea?"

"Yes"

"Was it good?"

"The best" said Ibrahim

"Can I ask you something Ibrahim? You should be here every morning to take care of matters in the house."

The request sent him swirling into the seventh heaven. He was numb with joy. After a long time he came back to his senses.

It was then that he saw Kunjali coming with a few books to the veranda. He sat on the big chair and opened the book.

When Ibrahim saw the chit of a boy sitting on Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal's precious chair he couldn't tolerate it. In a split second he ran up to Kunjali pounced on him lifted and dumped him with his books on a bench near by and said,

"This chair is not yours"

Kunjali swiftly shifted his brimming eyes to the book....its pages got all wet.

Attabi was very pleased. Ibrahim had proved himself to be an efficient caretaker; a true blue blood indeed.

45

Andy master was filling forms for the children's scholarships exam; soon it was Kunjali's turn.

The master opened the white sheet of paper, took out his swan pen, removed the cap and then fitted it at the other end of the pen. Then for a few seconds he sat looking at the swan engraved on the top of the cap.

His action brought back a lot of memories for Kunjali. Thangaluppappa never put the cap on the other end of his swan pen. Being an aesthete he always kept it aside. He disliked the idea of its sleek body being bruised by the cap.

"Name", asked Andy master but Kunjali was still with Pookaya Thangal,

"I'll beat the day lights out of you now, what are you brooding over? What's your name?"

"Kunjali" stammered a shocked Kunjali

"Your father's name?"

"Khan Bahadoor Pookaya Thangal"

Andy master stared at Kunjali for a long time. Then his gray eye brows went up weaving a web of creases on the forehead. With a mocking smile spreading on his smoke stained lips he asked,

"So you are the son of such a great man, are you?" Kunjali bent his head in answer.

"You should bend your head in shame. Isn't there any limit to your audacity? You tramp!" After this out burst he tried to write something on the form. But the ink was dried up. The master rubbed the nib with his left finger. Still the pen refused to write; so he shook the pen violently; a dribble of ink fell on his dirty dhothi; soon it spread, tracing little maps on the khadar cloth.

"Hm.., what a cursed speck!"

He grumbled to on one in particular. After that he asked Kunjali a few more questions and completed the form.

Soon it was time for lunch. At the sound of the bell the children ran out with a roar and crowded the tea stalls around the school. Tiffin boxes covered with rolled banana leaves were carried to the school building. Most of the children had cassava or chick pea curry and puttu with coffee. And the masters ate rice with sambar and buttermilk. But Kunjali didn't have any lunch. He saved his lunch money and gambled for pea nuts; when he rolled the wheel seven times he got eight nuts for his two annas. Making a pouch out of his shirt front he put the peanuts in it. As soon as he moved away from the peanut seller the boys crowding behind him howled aloud

and snatched away all his pea nuts. Mad with anger he beat up the guy who grabbed the lot of his nuts. They fell to the ground in a heap and the boy who lost screamed at him. "Bastard"

Kunjali was beaten again. Sadly he realised that he was an out cast in that school too. He couldn't concentrate on any of the lessons in the afternoon.

Kunjaambu master was teaching history. The stories were about the Aryans from Central Asia who crossed the Khyberr pass and the Boalan pass to reach India. Grazing their cattle and looking for water and fodder they reached our land. Later they began to cultivate on the delta of the rivers. The yield was good and life was easy. It was then they divided themselves into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. Then came the composition of the Vedas. The Aryans defeated and chased the Dravida landlords deep into the south. We are their descendants......The class listened to these fascinating facts in rapt attention. Kunjambu master's classes were always engrossing.

When the lesson was over, sitting on the three legged chair, he took out a beedi from the folds of his handloom shirt sleeve and tried to light it. The first match stick broke into two. The second one was struck three times in vain. Seeing there was no third one, he angrily chucked the empty match box out of the window. The master then asked class leader Balakrishna Nair to get some fire.

He ran to Kunjiraman's tea stall and came back with some smouldering ambers in a coconut shell. The master sat back, lit the beedi and puffed it in earnest a few times. Then he got up and went to the window, keeping his fingers in a 'V' shape on his lips he spat out a few times.

After his history lessons Kumjambu master always needed a smoke. Once the routine was completed he got up to survey the class.

"You there, the one with white stripes on the black shirt, stand up", Kunjambu master never called anyone by his real name. The one who sees Koilandi when he looks at Kozhikode, "Arunachalam Chettiar" "the one without underwear", "speckled yellow", "baby little", thus went his nick-names for his students.

Kunjali stood up "Tell me, where did the Aryan's come from?"

Smart Kunjali stood silent. Normally the teachers turned to Kunjali when no one else could give the right answer. Today inspite of all those exciting tales narrated in the class his face looked as blank as a sheet of paper.

"Sit down"

Kunjali sat down and the master didn't repeat the question to anyone else.

If Kunjali couldn't answer no one else could. The master sat down and smoked a few more beedies and each time the class leader K.D. Balakrishna ran to Kunjiraman's stall for fire.

At last Kunjambu master left the class in great frustration.

Kunjali reached home like an angry wind and went straight to bed without his evening tea. Pookunji was soon at his side, she asked.

"Why aren't you studying"

Usually Kunjali spent his evenings with his books.

"School is closed for Onam" he replied.

Sensing his sorrow Pookunjabi sat close to him on the bed and stroked his hair. Her touch soothed Kunjali like a cool stream. After a while he sat up. He saw the tears in her suruma-lined eyes; slowly he bent down to plant a kiss on her check-his first kiss. Kunjali felt greatly relieved.

Right then Military Ibrahim came into the room. When Thangal was alive he dared not touch even the drapes of the house, let alone walk into an inner room. Now he was everywhere flitting from the front porch to the kitchen. Pointing an accusing finger at Pookunjibi he said "Beekutty, this is not right, you are not a little girl anymore. Young maids like you shouldn't be sitting with men".

Pookunjibi stood up scorched by this remark.

"Beekutty, you go down"

Kunjali heard her climb the stairs. Military Ibrahim cocked his right hand like a gun at Kunjali and growled.

"Don't you try to get fresh you scum. Be a servant and you'll be allowed to continue to live here"

With that he stamped down the stairs on his rickety legs.

Before long there were a lot of changes in Arakkal Tharvad. Besides guarding the house Buhari was burdened with a lot of extra duties. He was entrusted with shopping, watering the gardens and filling water in pots, he was not allowed to sleep during the day. He could bear all of it except the last one. Not to sleep duirng the day was something he couldn't live with. He cursed Ibrahim from the bottom of his heart; not just Buhari many others in the house cursed him too.

Hydrose the servant boy, maids in the kitchen, Mukri from the mosque, even the horse man joined the encore.

46

It was many days after the demise of Khan Bahadoor Pookoya Thangal but for the new horseman it seemed as if not even a day had passed. Each of his days began with his master's ride on his horse and it was not even a few hours since Thangal had taken his last ride, he thought.

When he wiped the blood from the horse's nose and face he was trembling in shock. That horse was the only one to soothe the deep wounds inflicted on the master. Perhaps it must have even led him in his last prayer. Beasts help those who have no one to help them.

The man and the horse couldn't sleep. Restless, the horse clomped on the ground in search of an escape route through the lairs of darkness. A journey or a ride must be the very essence of its existence.

Resting on wandering Andraman's bed the new horseman tried to dive deep into the pools of sleep. Treading on memory and facts, he was almost falling asleep when he heard Thangal calling for him in a blaring voice.

"Dai horse man".

The horse man woke up and came to Thangal, shame faced.

"Can't you hear the call for prayer, you fool? Are you still sleeping?"

Far away in the mosque Eramullan's Adhan was coming to an end.

"What are you gawking at? Go and get the horse ready"

Said Thangal twisting his mustache.

The horse man was in great spirits. He leaped into the stable and stroked the sleeping horse on its back. The horse shook its head and woke up, drank kanji water and came to the front all saddled up.

Then suddenly the lights went out. Actually the horse man didn't imagine this. There were no lights or lamps in the vicinity. As the man was staring at the sky, dawn began to break. And he heard the voice of the new mukri from the mosque. There was no Thangal anywhere nor was there Eramullan to call for prayer.

The gates of Arakkal Tharavad were closed. Slowly and steadily the horse and the man got into a kind of frenzy. Something like poison began to creep up his veins to his head. He went back to the stable and wore Thangal's jeans and Khaki shirt. He had safely kept them aside after the post mortem.

He specially checked for the thirteen rips on the front and the back of the shirt. No they weren't there. That shirt must be still with the police.

He brought the horse to the gate. Stroked it and then mounted him. Kunjali was sleeping there oblivious of all the goings on.

The horse began to race. The horseman was deep in thought, it centered around Military Ibrahim. He wanted to teach him a lesson. He wanted Ibrahim to see him riding in Thangal's clothes.

Galloping past the ration shop and the beach road the horse reached the slopes of Gosai hills. There it rested for a while and then took an enormous leap and landed in front of Perachan's empty hut. It trotted around the house of death three times, then it stood

for a long item looking at the spot where Thangal fell dead. The man sitting on the horse was in a bewitched world.

But when the horse began to fly through the air the horse man woke up. It was racing to the west. Speeding past the shacks and sandy fields the horse reached the sea shore.

The sea was rising. The horse stood still, looking at the laughing waves crashing on the shore for a moment.

Then in one leap the horse and the man were in the ocean, as they hit the waves they split into two. No one has ever seen the horse or the man after that.

47

Military Ibrahim became a permanent fixture in Arakkal Tharvad. He lived there, stayed there and sat on Thangal's big chair.

Though he was slightly younger than Thangal he looked older than him. Their facial resemblance was remarkable. The villagers gossiped about their father being the same. Even now they stick by the same story.

When Thangal's father Khan Bahadoor was in charge of the tharavad, Ibrahim was not yet born. But his mother was a contemporary of the senior Bahadoor.

Khan Bahadoor was greatly interested in all the folk songs and dances especially the oppana, kolkali and kaikotikali. And Ibrahim's mother Khadeeja was a famous oppana singer and a known beauty. Tall, fair and lovely, her big eyes were like a lake reflecting the azure of the sky.

Kaadeeja became quite a celebrity with her singing and her looks. Listening to her sing made men dizzy and seeing her, they turned cupid. Valia Thangal drunk with music often invited Khadeeja home with other singers. Gradually he wanted to listen only to Khadeeja.

Usually after the performance she went back home. But then Thangal began to hold court all night. That's how Khadeeja became

pregnant. Soon she was chased out of her dwelling. As she had no one of her own, she used to live with some distant relations of hers.

The abandoned Khadeeja roamed around the village with her bulging belly. Words of pity and curse were her only food. All doors were closed on her face and all the people she met were indignant. Finally with no one to turn to for shelter she went to the Machanari hills to live under a bridge.

She slept at the mouth of the big tunnel under the bridge with spiders, toads and lizards. No one heard her cries of pain in child birth for she swallowed in silence the agony of her contractions. But the screams of her infant were heard above the bridge and the travellers above were indignant again.

They buried the dead mother and sheltered the living baby.

Some how or the other Ibrahim grew up. Even he wasn't sure how. Going to the school, being bit by a mad dog and getting fourteen injections on teh stomach, starving for days and joining the military were some of the events he remembered.

It was only when he left the forces and came to live in the village did he realize the extent of his loneliness. When he was a soldier the enemy was his aim and a woman his dream. The last of his ten years in the army he had lived for these two entities.

But when he came back there was no home or relatives for him. Pookoya Thangal was his only refuge. So he settled in a hut on Thangal's land.

Many came eager to arrange an alliance for him. But he was adamant about his decision. A bastard needn't marry, he concluded. But he knew who his father was and that knowledge smouldered inside him.

It was still fuming. It was the same burning rage that propelled him to Thangal's favorite chair.

Within two years of Thangal's death Ibrahim was led from the grave to the grand chair. Now he was in charge of the tharavad. Planting paddy, picking coconuts, collecting rent and attending court, everything fell under his jurisdiction.

Every one in the tharavad including Attabi was under his command. But he feared just one person, Kunjali.

He considered him, his mortal enemy. Either him or me- the two of us cannot survive under the same roof, was Ibrahim's conviction.

When Kunjali was studying in the ninth standard, the hostilities exploded to a climax

School was closed for Onam. The sky was bright and blue and the whole earth was covered in bloom. Kunjali could hear the children sing on the slopes of the hill and every house was decorated with flower designs.

Kunjali's room was still upstairs. That hadn't changed yet. When he looked out of the window he could see the masjid grounds, railway station, the paddy fields beyond the station and the distant hills. It was getting late yet the children were still singing and gathering flowers.

Kunjali was feeling quite frisky, then Pookunji walked into his room. She came in whenever she could. When no one was around Pookunji loved to come and look in on him.

Today, her dark eyes seemed darker to him. "This is Kojathi Suruma, before she could finish Kunjali hugged her tight and kissed her. He was trembling all over. His knees buckled under and he couldn't focus his eyes.

Then he saw Military Ibrahim standing in front of them fuming. His right hand curled into a fist. But he walked back without a word and went down the stairs noiselessly just as he had come.

In the kitchen Attabi was sitting on an upturned wooden pounder. Her thick black was let loose and her head was not veiled. A maid was looking for lice on her head.

When Ibrahim walked in and cleared his throat, seeing his red eyes the maid ran in. But Attabi sat cool on her seat. After all even Thangal's majestic, heavy steps had never ruffled her.

Now slowly standing up she covered her head, pointed her fingers at him and said.

"You go back to the front and send word for me. Behave like a gentleman"

Feeling guilty, Ibrahim walked back to the front of the house.

Attabi followed him. Then standing behind the curtain she enquired,

"Um? What is the matter?"

"Nothing"

"Then why did you come into the kitchen?"

"Just like that"

"Then don't come into the kitchen ever again. Is that clear?"

She released the curtain and walked away. Then he called "Bi"

"Um? What?"

"The situation is pretty bad".

"Whose?"

"Pookunji's"

Then he launched into a detailed description of the incident with a lot more juice and colour, and Attabi ordered,

"Fix the date for the marriage immediately"

"Whose?"

"Her's"

"With whom?"

"Kunjali"

Military Ibrahim was taken aback. What the heck was Attabi talking about? Had she taken complete leave of her sense, he wondered. When he stood like a target struck by a thunder bolt, Attabi narrated that old story. It had happened almost fourteen years ago.

When Kunjali and Pookunji were mere toddlers Thangal had made Attabi promise something. Holding her close to him with his left hand and pointing at the playing children with his right he had said,

"Don't give them away"

Ibrahim, pondered over the story a long time and then said.

"This is an aristrocratic Tharavad and Pookunji is the last link in

its noble lineage. If you marry her off to an orphan, people will laugh at us. The whole world will laugh".

Hearing his explanation Attabi sat pouting her red lips and Ibrahim sat looking at her. Slowly he began to look at her with a renewed interest. His eyes lingered on her wide forehead, her thick black curls dancing under her veil, her rosy cheeks, her lovely dark eyes and her double chin. Her figure was good and her bosom firm.

Feeling his steady gaze on her, she lowered her head, pulled the veil down and asked.

"What can we do now?"

Ibrahim answered instantly,

"Find a bridegroom for Pookunji immediately"

"Alright" After that she didn't utter a word but Ibrahim continued to talk.

It was late at night, the flame was flickering, raising the wick Ibrahim went out and Attabi went in, their different ways.

In two days it was the feast of Thiru Onam, Children stopped picking flowers and singing songs. The coming of onapottan was the next main attraction.

Kunjali and Pookunji waited with bated breath to see Andimalyan in the guise of Onapottan. Just before dawn they heard the tinkling of the bells. It was coming from far beyond the hills. It meant that Andimalyan had started his run as Onapottan.

Kunjali and Pookunji got up in a hurry, washed their face, drank their tea and ran to the stone wall to see the Onapottan. Seeing his crowned head under the elaborately decorated umbrella and bells they shouted in joy.

Sudden a hand fell on Kunjali's nape. Before he could turn around he was pushed hard to the ground. As he fell he saw his tormentor, Military Ibrahim.

Kunjali got up, Ibrahim grabbed him again, shoved him aside and shouted,

"Get lost, you devil".

Kunjali fell flat on his face. Blood streamed down his nose to his shirt and the mud below.

Onapottan's bells were still tinkling; moving east it slowly faded into silence.

48

One day early in the morning the gate house was found to be wide open. A fierce east wind came rushing through the gaping gate, dumping a lot of garbage in the front. The heavy drapes went up in the air and was left hanging upside down.

It was military Ibrahim who came out first. Now a days he had began to live there permanently. It started with a few nights. Then, it became a continuous stay for a few days and finally a permanent one.

The first servant to get up had to open the front door, sweep the place and fill the brass pots with water. After that she had to get a Theeyathi to sweep and clear the yards and then bring a glass of tea to Ibrahim. All these were Ibrahim's new rules.

Seeing the wide opened front door Ibrahim was in a rage "Hai, dog" he barked. But no one answered him.

"Where the hell are you? You idiot" He bellowed again and wandered around the gate house and its veranda. He saw the old tattered mattress neatly folded and kept, the rotting pillow was ripped here and there and the cotton in it was coming out.

Ibrahim skirted around the house and the granite wall calling for buhari in a stately manner. The frowing and raging he checked the entire grounds for Buhari.

But Buhari had left for good. He had bought a ticket from Gabriel for the 6.30 train to Calicut. The face came to light some time later in the day. After that no one ever saw Buhari again.

Buhari's disappearance became a hot topic of conversation in Kannan the nine and a half's tea stall. Thyaar said Ali suspected

Military Ibrahim of chasing Buhari away. But Aadeen chandu Nair insisted that Buhari had left for Ponnani on his own free will. Yet postmaster Govinda Kurup smelt some foul play. He feared that Buhari was beaten to death and dumped in the well by Ibrahim.

That evening a lot of them gathered around the mosque well, looking for a dead body. But there was nothing but greasy water in it. Disappointed they returned to Kannan's stall for more tea and gossip.

The new developments in arakkal Tharavad shocked the people of the village both individually and collectively. The rise of Military Ibrahim was like that of non-entity becoming a Prime Minister over night. He ruled the house, changed the rules as he pleased and every one including Attabi was now completely under him.

"What is there to wonder?" said Thyaar Saidali,

"He is Thangal's own brother".

"How is that?" enquired cart driver Kunjaman.

"His mother Oppana singer Khadeeja was Valia Thangal's concubine. So Thangal's own brother is now married to Attabi" saying this Saidali put the glass emphatically on the table".

"That is right" agreed Kannan stirring an empty spoon in a glass.

Military Ibrahim and the other inmates of the Tharavad didn't hear any of this. Only Pathumma tried to find out whatever was going on outside the house. But her mouth was effectively sealed by Ibrahim. Sensing her to be an obstacle in his path he lowered her status and curtailed her duties. Now her job was to merely water the kitchen garden and to look after the ducks.

Then one day Pookunjibi began to menstruate. She didn't divulge this to anyone. Because once when a little blood ran out of Kunjali's nose a terrified Kunjali had run to Pathu and Pookunji heard her consoling him. "This is all God's play my boy. Such things do happen to girls and boys but you needn't tell it to anyone".

So Pookunjibi didn't utter a word to anyone. But can anyone hide anything from Kuraisipathu. She hugged Pookunji in the kitchen garden and laughed aloud. Her crackle brought the whole troop of maids out into the yard.

Then Pathu scolded them and covered Pookunji's bum with her left hand and ushered her into the washroom.

Pookunji in the first flush of youth was all radiant. She didn't come to Kunjali for many days then; one day when she bumped into him unexpectedly, she lowered her head and blushed. Kunjali's damp lips with the hit of dark mustache above them closed on her moist lips.

That evening after his supper Kunjali sat in his room getting ready to study. Then Hydrose the servant boy came in. His duties in the house had changed too.

"He's calling you".

"Who?"

"Ibrahim"

Kunjali climbed down the stairs in darkness. In the veranda Ibrahim was looking through some land deeds in the light of the kerosene lamp. Narayana Kurup, the lawyer's clerk was sitting close to him on a mat examining another deed. He was bending over the record wearing thick glasses with steel rims. The knot of a black string that held the glasses at the back of his head stood out like a switch on his bald head.

Suddenly Narayana Kurup shook the paper hard. A big silver fish fell out of it and ran and Kurup tried in vain to squash it with his left toe.

Then Ibrahim lifted his head "Kunjali! Kurup, Kunjali has come"

Kurup extricated his body from the bundle of records.

"Ha-what all the news Kunjali?"

Kunjali had no news except a lost past and a frightening future ahead!

"Which class are you in now?"

"Ninth"

"Good", said Kurup, then he spat out, pressed his tongue on his gums and continued.

"That is more than enough you can read and write. Which other

muslim in North Malabar has had such good fortune?"

Kunjali didn't reply.

Then Ibrahim asked.

"Did you understand?"

Kunjali looked at Ibrahim in wonder.

"You are not going to school from tomorrow. There is a lot of work here and I'm not paying any worker to do it".

Kunjali's ears were burning and his eyes were brimming with tears. Without making as much as a sound he drew back into the darkness of the house. Then Ibrahim informed him.

"From tomorrow on, you are not to sleep in the night".

Kunjali came upstairs to his room. There lying among the bed bugs he cried himself to sleep. In his sleep someone came to him on the back, caressed his cheeks and stroked his hair. In the cool comfort of that loving touch Kunjali opened his eyes - Pookoya Thangal!

Kunjali tried to kiss the hand that was fondling him. But the minute he touched his hand Thangal shrank back to the wall and faded away.

Kunjali screamed in panic. Fear like a slaughtered chicken flapped its wings and feet in his heart.

Kunjali opened his eyes and ears.

He heard Ibrahim grating from outside the room.

"Go to sleep, you devil. There is no point in screaming your head off. Your school days are over. Stopped for good"

Kunjali closed his eyes. He tried hard to calm himself and sleep.

49

Next day in the morning Kunjali felt more lost then ever. Where was he to go? What was he to do? After brushing his teeth and drinking a glass of tea, he sat under a hog plum tree turning the pages of an old newspaper

."Hey, come here"

Military Ibrahim was clapping from the veranda for him.

"I didn't stop your studies just for the fun of it. You have to work. I don't dole out food here".

When Kunjali stared back blindly, he said,

"Don't you understand anything. Pookoya Thangal's reign is over. Now the Osar (minister) is in power. Gripping his shoulder Ibrai continued,

"You go up to Moidu's store and ask him to come here"

Though hardly literate, Ibrai loved to converse in literary language.

Kunjali walked down the gate and briskly began to walk across the mosque grounds. But when he reached the rain tree, unwittingly he looked up to see the same branch on which Bappu Kanaran had hung himself. Every time he looked he saw, just that one branch. To him the one branch that stretched out to the south had the potency of the gallows.

Kunjali sat under the rain tree and looked around. The new mukri was sleeping on the grave of the old Mukri with a book on his chest. Looking at him doves were crooning. The green snakes on the trees made a plaintive noise and flew on to the next tree. Besides these the ground was empty and desolate.

After a while Kunjali heard the sound of a spade hitting the earth. One more person dead he thought.

Kunjali got up. When he reached the station road he saw Moosa and Adruman digging a grave. Adruman's dark body was glistening in the sun and the beads of sweat on his body shone like pearls. Soon there will be a lot of noise.

The corpse and the crowd will arrive and then after burying and praying for the dead the crowd will disperse. The grave diggers will leave after they collect their wages. After everyone leaves the grave yard will become quiet till they come to dig a new grave in a couple of days, pondered Kunjali.

When Kunjali returned from his errand Ibrahim was still sitting in the front. Seeing him he leaped up like a crunching lion.

"Did you see Moidu?"

"Yes"

"What did he say?"

"He is coming soon"

With that Kunjali lifted the drapes and went in. Ibrahim glared at him from behind. Kunjali reached his room and saw that it was locked from outside, the hall was in complete darkness.

He couldn't comprehend it. Who had locked him out?

Was it Pookunjibi? She was big on playing practical jokes these days.

Kunjali came down the stairs, when he was about to go into the kitchen quarters he heard the familiar clapping again. Kunjali turned around and Ibrahim stopped the clapping and gestured him to come to him.

"Where are you going?"

"To the kitchen"

"Why?"

Kunjali had no answer for that. "Mister, you are a young man now. And the kitchen and the inner court yard are full of women and children"

"Yes, I know that"

"You do, do?"

"Yes"

With that Ibrahim pounced on the back of Kunjali's neck, shoved him through the house and yard to the guard house. Then releasing

his hold he pointed to the sides of the guard house and the veranda and said.

"Look"

Kunjali looked. The whole place was littered with his possessions. From his bed to his reading light everything was strewn on the floor. It was a kind of eviction. Kunjali just stood staring at the mess. The Ibrahim said.

"From now on don't you ever go into the house. Here after your room is this guard house and your job is what Buhari used to do".

That night Kunjali couldn't get any sleep. The guard house and the veranda were full of bed bugs and they began to bite him with vengeance. Then he heard Ibrahim.

"Did you lock the gate?"

Kunjali got up in a hurry locked up the place and lay down again.

"I asked you a question. Have you locked the gate? Where is your tongue?"

"It is locked".

The light in the porch was put out. The garden was in darkness and the door closed with a groan.

Kunjali felt restless. He opened the gate and got out. As he passed the mosque he saw that the Mukri had put his light out to go to sleep.

Walking through the thickets and shrubbery he reached Thangal's tomb, and burst into tears. The dry earth around the tomb was damp with his warm tears.

Back in the house, Kunjali saw Pookoya Thangal in his dream. He was reclining on his favorite chair on the veranda. When he was about to tell him about Ibrahim's cruel deeds, he woke up in a shock.

The bugs in the guard house had launched a full fledged attack on him. He tossed around till dawn and dozed off in the morning. It was a stream of abuse that woke him. Ibrahim was shouting at him.

"Even the devil won't get caught sleeping at this time" he said.

Kunjali scampered up and folded his bedding. Ibrahim stood watching him. When Kunjali was about to go out, striking him at the back Ibrahim ordered.

"Water the plants first, then go to the market to buy fish".

As Ibrahim was about to walk away, he turned back to inform him.

"Buying fish from the market and watering the garden daily are your chores. Remember that"

Kunjali listened with his head hung down.

For the past two weeks he hadn't seen Pookunjibi. His whereabouts were limited to the porch and the guard house. After Ibrahim threw him out, Kunjali never touched the drapes again to go inside the house.

In his new role Kunjali had to get up very early in the morning. Before he finished brushing his teeth Hydrose left tea and puttu at the gate house and by the time Kunjali could get to it the food turned stone cold. Lunch was served very late, after every one had finished eating. At night he had to share his supper with the Mukri. They were served on the same bowl with one wooden spoon. The first few days he didn't drink any Kanji at all. As the Mukri took spoon full of kanji he spilled more than mouthful of spittle into it. A disgusted Kunjali just stuck to the side dish to kill his pangs of hunger.

One night when he was asleep some one came in and tapped him. He woke up with a start wondering which ghost had come in through the closed doors. It was Pathumma.

Choking with emotions they didn't speak to each other; running her fingers through his hair she cried a lot.

"Son, let us go away somewhere. I cannot live in this hell hole" said she. But he didn't say anything; he just sat up.

"Let this Tharavad be ruined. Military Ibrahim has bewitched Attabi with black magic. Now he sleeps on Thangal's bed".

Pathumma went out. She had lost her will to talk and all she did was shed tears.

Just as Pathumma left his room it was filled with Pookunjibi's perfume. He couldn't trust his senses. But when Kunjali opened his eyes Pookunjibi was standing right in front of him.

She had grown big, Kunjali realised it when her hearl throbbed against his.

They didn't to speak each other. Tears was the only language between them too. When she left him no one saw her crimson face in the moon light.

Kunjali walked to the garden, Pathumma and Pookunjibi were creeping by the stable to the kitchen beyond the pappaya trees. Even after Pookunji disappeared behind the wall he saw her shadow lingering for a few seconds. Then it vanished like a lotus stem into the thick darkness of the night. The moon was far out in the west.

On the next night hearing some one moving about, Kunjali lifted his head. It was Pookunjibi again.

Kunjali raised the wick that Buhari had raised for years.

"Pookunjibi!"

"Yes?"

She was gasping for breath.

"What?" she was still breathing hard. There were no words and in the dim light of the lantern he couldn't make out what her eyes spoke.

"Um?" Kunjali's vocabulary had shrunk to a minimum.

"Take.....take me...."

She was full of sobs.

In between her deep sighs she lifted her face and pleaded

"Take me away, from here to any place"

She was full of sobs.

In between her deep sighs she lifted her face and pleaded.

"Take me away, from here to any place"

Then suddenly a window in the second floor opened and Ibrahim's head appeared in the dim blue light coming from the room. Along came another head without veil. Even in the dim light the face looked flushed, Attabi was forty five and still glowing. The face disappeared as suddenly as came.

Seeing Attabi Pookunjibi was frightened. Kunjali walked back to the veranda and crawled under his sheet to go back to sleep. Pookunji moved stealthily back to the house, past the empty stable and clinging to teh big wall she reached the house.

The kitchen door was closed. It was strange for it to be locked this early. Pookunji knocked at the door for a long time. The she called out to Pathu and cursed her in hushed tones.

Finally when the door was opened, greatly relieved, she stepped into the house. Then she got the shock of her life, instead of Pathu it was Ibrahim who stood in front of her.

But he didn't utter a word to her. Locking the door behind them he climbed up the stairs in a hurry.

50

Six Bibis came from Koilandi to see Pookunjibi. With them came a few maids, muslim ladies of course and a lot of women and children.

Dressed in new clothes the henna on her hands and Kojathi Suruma in her eyes, Pookunjibi stood in front of the women like an exhibit.

The Tharavad was drowned in a flurry of activity.

Two horse carriages were stationed in front of the guard house. The drivers stood close by. Kunjali stood like a beacon at the gate.

But when Ibrahim walked in Kunjali was sitting on the floor with his head resting on his knees; striking him hard on his arched back, Ibrahim said.

"Look here".

Startled Kunjali dropped his knees and stood up.

"Don't you dare move from here until the guests leave. Don't tempt me to test my strength on you"

The front of the house was bustling with a lot of people mainly Ibrai's henchmen. There were hardly any of Thangal's men there. Once a Mapilla started living in the house all the aristocratic attendants of Thangal bade goodbye to the place. They cursed Ibrahim and the house and prayed for its ruin, all five times a day.

The welcoming ritual had exhausted Ibrahim. He hugged each one of the guests and served them cigarettes and pan with his own hands.

Inside the house Attabi ran up and down receiving the women, sprinkling rose water on their heads and decorating the children's eyes with suruma. Every now and then she went in to dab a little Attar on herself.

There were a couple of Bibis and a few maids in the group from Koilandi. The eldest among them sat on the chair like a stuffed sack. The fat Kadeesakutty was also the bridegroom's mother. Her gray hair was covered under a silk veil and her tired feline eyes were singularly unattractive. The gold 'Chavidi' on her neck weighed a solid fourteen sovereigns. And her huge breasts hung down to her naval. She had anklets on her fat legs and blazing Koilandi Henna on her toes and nails.

When ever she walked or sat she gasped for breath. Her lungs seemed to be filled with newly hatched chicks whose twittering came out through her nostrils. In between her heavy breathing she asked for Pookunjibi and Pathumma brought Pookunji to her.

Lifting her arms weighed down with flesh Kadeesa kutty called Pookunji.

"Come here, my daughter"

As Pookunji inched towards her she clasped her with both her hands, Pookunji stared at Kadeesa's fingers they were stuck together like a piece of ginger root and the palm of her hand was as fat as dumpling. There was also an extra piece of flesh hanging from each little figure which threatened to fall off any moment.

When Kadeesa pulled down Pookunji to her lap, she felt as if she was sitting on a bale of cotton.

After the feasting Kadessakutty asked for Pookunji again; when she was ushered in, Kadeesa put a heavy gold ring on her finger saying.

"You are to be my darling son's wife.

This time she held her for a long time on her lap and stroked Pookunji's hair with her webbed fingers, slowly; they travelled down the neck to the bosom.

"Not enough" she said.

"What?", enquired Attabi anxiously.

"Nothing" pushing her prodding fingers down to Pookunji's navel Kadeesa assured.

"My son can fix all that?"

Then suddenly remembering something she began to laugh aloud. It went on for so long that people around her began to worry about her sanity.

But then she stopped it, kissed Pookunji on the the top of her head and said good bye.

As the men outside moved to a side and closed their eyes the women walked out quickly to the road. Ibrahim was everywhere in front and at the back too.

The horse and the carriage was ready. When the first carriage was filled, the rest piled into the next one. Children howled and adults scolded and finally smiling at everyone Kadeesakutty bade her farewell.

"See you later"

Since she was rather huge, she put her one foot on the foot board and tried to get in through the open door. Then hesitating she tried to get in through different openings and nothing worked. Eventually Military Ibrahim gave her a slight push and she landed inside with a groan. The card sagged down and the woman gasped. Soon the silk curtains were lowered and the carriage moved on. And Military Ibrahim returned to the veranda.

Kunjali watched in silence. In his heart a hundred doves crooned together. Hydrose came to the guard house with a plateful of cold ghee rice and mutton curry. Leaving his plates on the floor he asked.

"Aren't you eating? This is the last of the ghee rice".

Kunjali stared at him in silence. The fellow's flat nose appeared flatter and his yellow face was gleaming with a mocking smile. Making a 'Hee,Hee' sound he went back to the kitchen, clapping his hands. Kunjali continued to stare at Hydrose's tiny foot prints in the sand.

Soon a Fakir came with a bundle on his shoulder and a staff in his hands. His face was full of wrinkles and his feet were muddy.

"Um?" Kunjali asked.

"I am hungry",

Then without giving it moment's thought Kunjali pointed to the plates and said,

"You can have that"

Before he could finish the sentence the Fakir had lapped up all the food, his eyes bulging and his face sweating. When the plates were empty the Fakir got up with a burp and licked his fingers clean and Kunjali felt happy.

After a puff of smoke, the Fakir looked at Kunjali and asked,

"Where are you from?"

"From no where" he said indifferently.

"Then?" the Fakir was completely confused.

"I am a Fakir too"

After that neither of them spoke. When the Fakir finished smoking his cigar, he went away and Kunjali followed him.

Kunjali went straight to the mosque grounds. The rain tree welcomed him. A mere passing glance at that particular branch and he could still see Bappukanaran hanging dead.

When he reached the well he felt the strong presence of Eramullan. The window sill on which he always laid his head was

empty clearly sunken with constant use. The new Mukri had his head resting on the opposite window.

Kunjali stood watching the water in the well. Then he saw a flash of radiance to the south of that oily water - Pookoya Thangal. By now Kunjali was blinded, he was delirious and lost to the world.

Then Kunjali went to Pookoya Thangal's tomb. It was right next to his father Valia Thangal's. The incence sticks left by some one was still burning there. He could feel the sweet fragrance filling the whole place.

He sat there a long time with his face pressed against Thangal's head stone. When it became dark he looked around. Hearing the call for the veening prayer Kunjali raced to the guard house leaping over Eramullan and Husain Koyas desolate graves.

51

Glowing lights and petromax lamps turned Pookunji's wedding night into a brilliant day. The house garden and the guard house stood bathed in light. And the brilliant hues of henna decorating the hands of women added to the luster of the glow.

Upstairs the women had dressed the bride and sat her in a room. Her sandals were made of zari and gold anklets adorned her ankles. She had silk wraparound, blouse and a solid gold waist band which kept slipping from her slender body. The immense weight of the jewels on her neck, weighed her down and her ear lobes were covered with ornaments. Her long hair was completely hidden under a banarasi veil.

With sweat on her head, dismay in her eyes and grief in her heart, Pookunji entered the bridal chamber with milk in her hand.

Immediately she looked at the bed. The groom - Valia Thangal's son from Koilandi was a skinny young man, thin as a drum stick.

He had protruding forehead, a tiny head, sunken eyes and cheeks and a lopsided mouth that was always open. It was filled

with rotten teeth and his pock marked face was all wrinkled.

Her eyes travelled down to his smelly underarms, hair less chest and bulging stomach. Must be full of worms, she thought, his lanky legs ended in two small feet full of cracks. His laboriously heaving chest seemed to breathe only ten times per minute.

Pookunji looked at his face again. The groom's eyes were closed and the spittle drooling down the corners of his mouth nauseated her.

Pookunjibi left the glass of milk on the table.

Outside her room the women were giggling and sniggering. Some of them who had led her to the room were trying to peep in through the window. Pookunjibi closed the window shutting the women out. Now the corridor was resounding with their laughter and merriment.

Inside the air was muggy. Pookunji removed her long veil and blouse and staggered on to the next bed in her lingerie. Immediately she heard a strange kind of cough, something that sounded like hacking on a battered barrel.

The bridegroom coughed and sat up with a mouth full of phlegm, his face upturned.

"Where is my spittoon"

Words oozed out like mucus from him. There was no spittoon in that room. He continued to mutter something with his mouth twisted in an angle. None of it made any sense. Pookunji was reminded of Thangal smoking his hookah.

The groom couldn't wait any longer. He splattered the contents of his mouth under the bed, reminding Pookunji of Andramans horse shitting in the stable. He coughed for a long time and after each bout of cough he spat on the floor.

When Pookunji raised the wick she saw pools of blood and yellow phlegm under the bed. She shrieked aloud. Hearing her scream women ran from the kitchen to her room but Ibrahim stopped them on the stairs asking,

"Where to?"

No one answered him.

"Isn't all this quite typical! After all Pookunji is not a baby to be frightened!" But the crying continued and Pathu pushed Ibrahim aside to run up the stairs. She knocked on the door and Pookunji opened it. As soon as she saw Pathu, Pookunji clung to her and cried even more.

A lot more people came up the stairs. By then the groom's people had left the girl's house.

There was a lot of confusion in the house. Flashing his five celled torch under the bed Ibrahim saw the river of blood and mucus, and said

"What's the big deal? He is a big landlord. With thousands of acres of paddy fields and unending stretch of coconut gardens and many other assets. After all she has to bear with him only for a few months"

Ibrahim felt the grooms forehead.

"Burning hot. Fever"

He shook him for a while and asked.

"Do you want a drink?"

But the groom by silent with a drop of blood in the corner of his mouth.

Komappan Vaidyar arrived that very night. He left his umbrella on the varandha. Shook his upper garment and put it back on his shoulder, fixed his glasses on his nose and began to examine the patient. He rapped all over the patient's chest and listened to the sound. He looked into his eyes and nose pressed with his fingers on his neck and heart, felt his pulse and said.

"Pathetic!"

Then Ibrahim moved closer to the Vaidyar, murmured something in his ear and put his hand on his shoulder. Instantly the Vaidyar pushed his hand away, glared at him through his glasses and declared.

"He is dying with T.B. You are the one behind all this. Let every one know this".

After that he stormed out of the door. Ibrahim stretched his hand with a note fluttering in it, Komappa Vaidyar fumed again.

"Pha!"

That was the last time Vaidyar ever set foot in that Tharavad.

Then it was Dr. Thampan's turn. For three days and nights he fought with medicine and injections. He visited the patient morning and evening and each time the horse cart raced to the hospital.

On the fourth day the patient opened his eyes and talked. Then Dr. Thampan took Ibrahim aside and said.

"This is only a temporary relief. He is in a very advanced stage of the disease. There is no more medicine for it.

"What to do now?"

Ibrahim was puzzled. Then Dr. Thampan dropped the bomb shell.

"Dig a new grave. After all he is the new groom isn't he?"

The night when Pookunjibi walked into her room, the groom was sitting up. Seeing her he smiled like a mutt, then his pale face grew paler and his eyes sank back into its holes.

He stood up and walked around the room a few times. That tired him out, so he sat on the bed breathing hard. The first thing he asked her on his recovery was.

"Can you get good rice chakkuli here?"

Pookunji was puzzled for a moment. Apart from having eaten it, she had no clue as to where it was available. She was worrying over it came the next question.

"Have you any rice chakkuli"

"No"

"Dummy"

Saying this he stared at her as if she had deprive him of the greatest pleasures of life. Then he continued.

"But you needn't cry. Tomorrow when I come back from Koilandi, I'll bring two of those - one for me and one for you"

By the time he talked so much, he was thoroughly exhausted, breathing heavily he slumped on the bed and fell asleep.

Pookunji moved to the window without paying any attention to the creature crumbled on the bed. When she lowered the flame of the lamp, everything in the room became hazy.

When she opened the window a cool breeze rushed into the room. The light in the mosque was still burning and the Mukri was reciting a prayer. Except for the dim light from his room the mosque ground was in darkness. A million fire flies were dancing over the graves and a host of ghosts, Jinns and devils were clapping their hands in time with their dance.

Pookunji got tired of watching it, she closed the window and went back to flop down on the bed. A gurgling sound like that of a hookah was still coming from the other bed.

She fell asleep, didn't know when or for how long. It was the constant knocking on the window that woke her. She opened her eyes to the dim light.

It was as if a dream land had opened its portals to her. A new world with fresh air and bright light. She could still hear the knocking on the window. Her groom was in a deep sleep.

She got up and opened the window. Outside the world bathed in moonlight. In the shining light of that fourteenth night she saw her prince and his horse. The prince for whom she'd been waiting for ages.

'Come' he called Pookunjibi in a soft voice. It was heavenly. The prince pressed his finger on his lips and gestured her to be quiet.

Pookunji's groom was still fast asleep. She lowered the wick a little more and walked to the door. She listened carefully for any sound. It was quiet everywhere.

"Come......Come.....Come"

Quietly Pookunji opened the doors one after another.

Early next morning when Ibrahim got up he was flabbergasted. The main door to the inner courtyard was wide open. As he walked on blaming himself for his slackness, he saw the most horrifying sight of all - every door in the house was left wide open. He went

straight to the guard house. The gate to the outside world stood ajar. In great anger Ibrahim looked in on Kunjali who was still sleeping.

"Get up, you devil" he screamed in Kunjali's ear. Kunjali jumped up as if struck by thunder.

Didn't you lock the gate last night, you scoundrel?" Before he could finish his question there came a cry from the inside of the house. First it was Pathumma and then Attabi.

"Pookunjibi is missing".

Pookunjibi was no where around. Everyone was running everywhere. They searched in the kitchen the domestic quarters, in the bathroom, in the toilet, in the stable and in the granary.

But Pookunji was no where to be seen.

Now the people began to run out, women, children big ones and small ones. Their cries and shouts filled the air. Kannan the nine and a half, closed his stall. All the people gathered in his restaurant began to run in every direction looking for Pookunji.

Hearing the commotion Gabriel the station master and his wife came out with cards in their hands. They saw people running on the rail track and splitting to the north and to the south.

Kunjali was not baffled at all. For a while he sat sniffing the air. He could feel Pookunji's scent drifting on the wings of a wind. He walked down the gate with no sense of a destination. All he had was his sense of smell.

With every step forward Pookunji's fragrance got stronger and stronger and he marched ahead.

By the time he walked past the station road main road and teh beach road, he was bathed in her special fragrance. He surged ahead, running past the Madapally mosque, the high school and the beach, going past the river that divided the beach into two and the rocks covered with barnacles calms, he reached the slopes of Gosai hills.

There on the desolate beach by the slopes of the hill Pookunji lay limp like a golden mermaid. The foaming surf lapping on the wet sand was sponging her cold body.

He stood there a long time watching the roaring, weeping sea and the never ending line of the sea - shore. It was as if he was trapped in a magic world of his own. Then a terrible din coming from far woke . He could hear the trumpets and the foot steps.

Looking to his north Kunjali saw a group of people walking on the immense stretch of sand. There were a lot of familiar and unfamiliar faces. Military Ibrahim was in front and behind him there were a lot of men.

Kunjali didn't wait any longer, he tramped on. As he went past Pookunjibi he dithered a while. Where was he going? Wither his destiny?

Suddenly remembering the hills of Onjeeyam he strode with determination, beyond the beach to the land - to those distant hills.



Glossary

Adhan	:	Call for prayer
Adhikari	:	Village Chief
Bibi	:	A female descendent of the prophet
Chettichy(F)	:	Generally a vendor
Chetty(M)	:	A caste hailed from Tamil Nadu
Dasvia	:	Rosary
Fakir	:	Member of muslim holy sect who lives by alms
Ikka	:	An honoric from of addressing an older male
Iyer	:	A Brahmin from Tamil Nadu
Iphreeth, Jinn, Malak, Saitan and Uruhani	:	Spirits and ghosts in the muslims lore
Kess Song	:	Muslim fold love song
Khafeer	:	non believer
Khaliar	:	imam of muslim community
Kurup	:	A Hindu Sub caste
Lungi	:	A lengthy coloured cloth wrapped around waist
Mukri	:	Muezzin
Mesan stone	:	Tomb
Musak	:	a brush
Muthalali	:	a richman
Nair	:	a hindu sub caste
Namboodiri	:	a kerala brahmin
Neyyappam	:	a kind of pancake of kerala
Osson	:	Hair dresser
Pathiri	:	deep fried rice sweet
Saiyids	:	a descendent of the prophet through his daughter
Suruma	:	Kajal
Swamy	:	a hindu ascetic
Thangal(M)	:	A muslim of high status
Theeya(M) Theeyathi(F)	:	a hindu sub caste
Thiruvathira Jathuvela	:	the beginning of the monsoon
Vaidyar	:	a doctor in Ayurvedic medicine
Wazu	:	a ritual body wash before prayer
Zakat	:	Distribution of alms at the end of the month Ramzan
Velicheppad	:	oracle at the temple

The story of *Smaraka Silakal* (Memorial Stones) is woven round a mosque and its surroundings. The author introduces the reader to a burial ground where many extinguished lives have found their lives and resting place. The novelist resurrects their lives and makes the characters re-enact their roles. The key figure is Pukkoya Thangal of the rich Arakkal family whose character is a rare mixture of dignity, benevolence, and inhuman lust. His story is supplemented by those of a horde of others quite different in their nature and approach to life and society-cantankerous, selfish men, their innocent and salient victims, illegitimate children of the wealthy who suffer life long humiliation, and conscientious but helpless spectators of this drama, etc..The author presents all these men and women before the reader in a manner marked by an almost total detachment. The novel *Memorial Stones* won the author both Kerala Sahitya Akademi and Sahitya Akademi awards respectively in 1977 and 1980.

The author of the work **Punathil Kunhabdulah** is a medical graduate and practicing physician. Even before he writing this novel he had made his presence felt by the freshness and strength of his short stories. His another popular novel *Marunnu* has been translated into several other Indian languages.

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